
Post-medieval dress accessories from recent urban excavations in Scotland

Adrian Cox

This paper presents a discussion of some of the small, everyday artefacts of post-medieval life which have been recovered from a number of recent excavations in urban Scotland. In some of these excavations, the medieval archaeology has been of primary importance; hence the artefactual evidence of the past three or four centuries has sometimes received relatively less attention in necessarily selective publication reports. The dress accessories discussed here have both archaeological and socio-historical significance. Each type of accessory has gone through a process of evolution, influenced by changing economic needs, fashions, social values and manufacturing technologies. The post-medieval development of these artefacts provides an evolutionary and technological link between their medieval predecessors and their present day equivalents.

The artefacts discussed specifically are all from excavations carried out by the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust between 1983 and 1995, in Elgin, Paisley, Perth and St Andrews.

Origins of dress accessories in archaeological deposits

A number of cultural processes contribute to the occurrence of dress accessories in archaeological contexts, and a range of cultural and non-cultural processes influence their condition upon recovery.

Artefacts are sometimes discarded because they are broken and can no longer reliably perform their intended function. Button fragment 2, for example, was probably broken prior to entering the archaeological record. One way in which buttons may occasionally have been fractured was by the use of buttonhooks, which were widely used accessories in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The working part of the buttonhook was usually made from steel to give it the necessary strength. This may also have enabled it to exert sufficient pressure to occasionally fracture a button. The spectacles (21) are broken in three

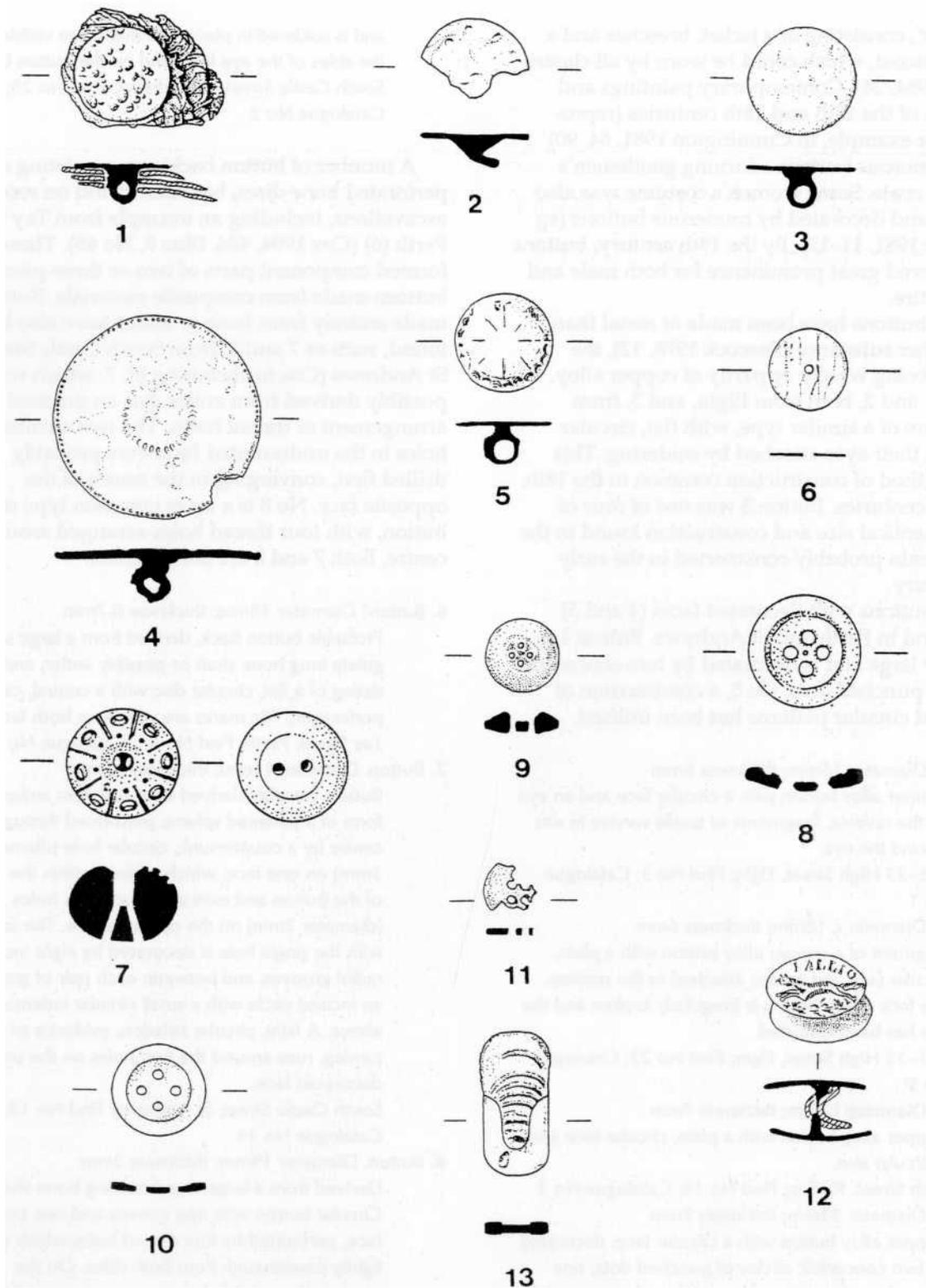
places, and it seems reasonable to suggest that one or all of these breakages may have occurred prior to deposition, and that any of them might account for the discarding of the object.

Some of the artefacts described here may have been attached to discarded items of clothing, despite, in some cases, still being in a usable condition. This may account for the occurrence of a group of similar buttons (including 3) in a drain fill in Paisley, and it also seems a likely explanation for the discard of the button from Elgin with fragments of textile attached to its rear face (1). As is the case nowadays, intact and still usable artefacts would sometimes have been discarded in the past in response to the vagaries of fashion and personal taste. An artefact only performs its function for as long as is required by its owner or user.

Accidental loss may account for the presence of some of these dress accessories in the archaeological record. In many cases it is difficult to identify which objects were deliberately discarded and which were lost; however, the possibility that an object was accidentally lost must be a consideration when it appears intact, little worn and theoretically able to perform its intended function. The cufflink from Paisley (12) may fall into this category, as may some of the buttons described below, including the two bone or antler examples (7 and 8).

Another cultural activity resulting in dress accessories entering the archaeological record is their deliberate burial by human agencies, normally in association with inhumations. This applies to two of the buttons described below (9 and 11), the circular eyelet (24), and probably to two pins (19 and 20).

Post-depositional processes act upon artefacts once they have entered archaeological contexts. Taphonomic factors, and processes such as deposit disturbance, re-deposition and weathering, lead to the breakage, erosion and decay of deposited objects. Hence, the small, mother-of-pearl button from Perth (11) now survives only as a



Illus 1. Buttons, cufflink and fastener (actual size).

fragment, and almost all of the dress accessories discussed here have been subject to some corrosion or decay through interaction with their burial environments.

Buttons (Illus 1)

Since their introduction as early as the 6th century

AD, buttons have been widely used in their dual role as both fasteners and decoration, and have been produced in very large numbers and from a wide variety of materials.

At some periods it was fashionable to wear large numbers of buttons. Social changes in the 17th century, with some of the earlier class barriers breaking down, gave rise to a more standardised

male 'suit', consisting of a jacket, breeches and a long waistcoat, which could be worn by all classes (Ewing 1984, 24). Contemporary paintings and drawings of the 17th and 18th centuries (reproduced, for example, in Cunnington 1981, 64, 90) show numerous buttons adorning gentlemen's suits and coats. Some women's costume was also fastened and decorated by numerous buttons (eg Bradfield 1981, 11-12). By the 19th century, buttons had achieved great prominence for both male and female attire.

More buttons have been made of metal than of any other substance (Peacock 1978, 12), the majority being wholly or partly of copper alloy. Buttons 1 and 2, both from Elgin, and 3, from Paisley, are of a similar type, with flat, circular faces and their eyes attached by soldering. This was a method of construction common in the 18th and 19th centuries. Button 3 was one of four of almost identical size and construction found in the fill of a drain probably constructed in the early 19th century.

Two buttons with decorated faces (4 and 5) were found in Perth and St Andrews. Button 4 is relatively large and is decorated by two concentric circles of punched dots. On 5, a combination of radial and circular patterns has been utilised.

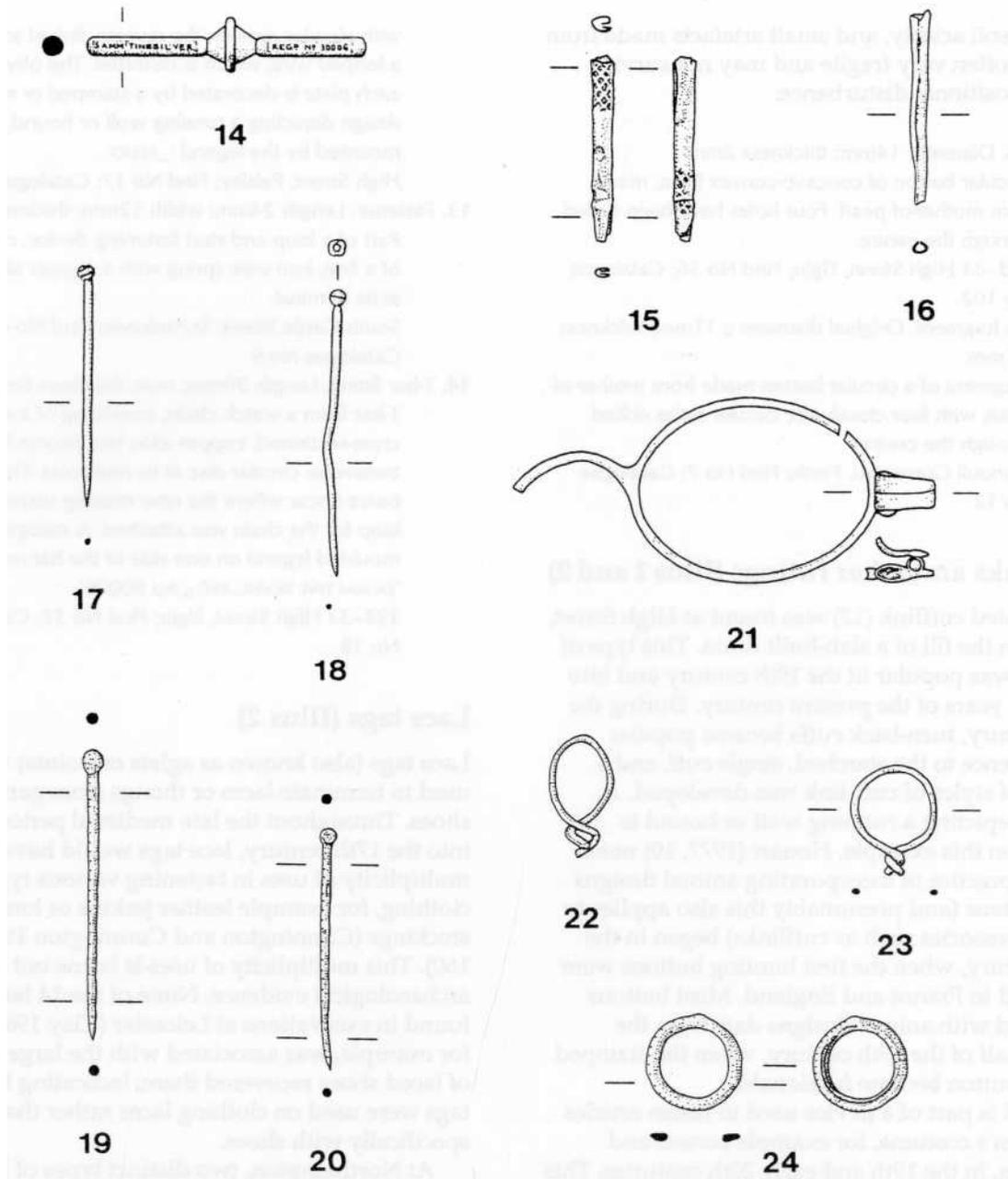
1. Button. Diameter 15mm; thickness 6mm
Copper alloy button with a circular face and an eye on the reverse. Fragments of textile survive in situ around the eye.
123-33 High Street, Elgin; Find No 3; Catalogue No 1
2. Button. Diameter c 18mm; thickness 6mm
Fragment of a copper alloy button with a plain, circular face and an eye attached to the reverse. The face of the button is irregularly broken and the eye has been distorted.
123-33 High Street, Elgin; Find No 22; Catalogue No 5
3. Button. Diameter 17mm; thickness 7mm
Copper alloy button with a plain, circular face and a circular eye.
High Street, Paisley; Find No 10; Catalogue No 3
4. Button. Diameter 33mm; thickness 8mm
Copper alloy button with a circular face, decorated by two concentric circles of punched dots; one around the circumference and the other around the centre with a diameter of 12mm. An eye is attached to the reverse, probably by soldering.
Meal Vennel, Perth; Find No 1339; Catalogue No 21
5. Button. Diameter 16mm; thickness 7mm
Copper alloy button with a flat, circular face decorated by an incuse design of three closely-spaced wavy lines around the border and eight radial lines converging at the centre. The design is partially obscured by corrosion. The eye is circular

and is soldered in place. File marks are visible on the sides of the eye loop and on the button back.
South Castle Street, St Andrews; Find No 25;
Catalogue No 2

A number of button backings, consisting of perforated bone discs, has been found on recent excavations, including an example from Tay Street, Perth (6) (Cox 1994, 484, Illus 9, No 45). These formed component parts of two or three-piece buttons made from composite materials. Buttons made entirely from bone or antler have also been found, such as 7 and 8, from South Castle Street, St Andrews (Cox forthcoming b). 7, which was possibly derived from antler, has an unusual arrangement of thread holes. The two smaller holes in the undecorated face were probably drilled first, converging in the centre of the opposite face. No 8 is a more common type of button, with four thread holes arranged around its centre. Both 7 and 8 are lathe-turned.

6. Button? Diameter 18mm; thickness 0.7mm
Probable button back, derived from a large ungulate long bone shaft or possibly antler, and consisting of a flat, circular disc with a central, circular perforation. File marks are visible on both faces.
Tay Street, Perth; Find No 34; Catalogue No 45
7. Button. Diameter 15mm; thickness 11 mm
Button, possibly derived from red deer antler, in the form of a flattened sphere, perforated through its centre by a countersunk, circular hole (diameter 3mm) on one face, which widens within the body of the button and exits as two circular holes (diameter 2mm) on the opposite face. The face with the single hole is decorated by eight incised, radial grooves, and between each pair of grooves is an incised circle with a small circular indentation above. A faint, circular striation, evidence of lathe-turning, runs around the two holes on the undecorated face.
South Castle Street, St Andrews; Find No 18;
Catalogue No 14
8. Button. Diameter 19mm; thickness 3mm
Derived from a large ungulate long bone shaft. Circular button with one convex and one concave face, perforated by four thread holes which are lightly countersunk from both sides. On the concave face a circular groove runs around the holes. At the centre of this face is a small indentation, possibly made by a tool during lathe-turning. Concentric, circular striations around this indentation are visible at x 30 magnification.
South Castle Street, St Andrews; Find No 14;
Catalogue No 15

Glass buttons were made in England at least from the end of the 17th century (Houart 1977, 54). A great variety of glass buttons, decorated by a



Illus 2. T-bar fitting, lace tags, pins, spectacles, wire rings and eyelet (actual size).

wide range of techniques and designs, was produced during the 19th century.

A small glass button of mid-19th-century type was found in close association with the burial of a child at Kinnoull Graveyard in Perth.

9. Button. Diameter 11 mm; thickness 3mm

Circular button made from opaque, white glass or from a synthetic substance, with a concave, circular indentation in one face which contains four closely-set, circular holes. The opposite face is flat where the holes exit.

Kinnoull Graveyard, Perth; Find No 6; Catalogue No 11

Mother-of-pearl buttons, made from white, deep-sea shells imported from Australia, the

Philippines and Indonesia, were made in France and England during the 18th and 19th centuries (Houart 1977, 79-80). The two main European production centres were Birmingham and Meru. In the latter, a small town in the department of Seine-et-Oise, France, the making of buttons was at first a cottage industry and the shells were cut by hand until machine tools became available (ibid, 75).

Button 10 is an example from High Street, Elgin, and 11, an extremely fragile fragment, was found with one of the inhumations at Kinnoull Graveyard, Perth.

It seems likely that the tendency of mother-of-pearl to laminate, particularly in damp conditions, makes complete examples of mother-of-pearl buttons fairly rare finds in archaeological deposits. Shell can disintegrate in the presence of higher

levels of soil acidity, and small artefacts made from shell are often very fragile and may not survive post-depositional disturbance.

10. Button. Diameter 14mm; thickness 2mm
Circular button of concavo-convex form, made from mother-of pearl. Four holes have been drilled through the centre.
123-33 High Street, Elgin; Find No 36; Catalogue No 102
11. Button fragment. Original diameter c 11 mm; thickness c 1mm
Fragment of a circular button made from mother-of-pearl, with four closely-set, circular holes drilled through the centre.
Kinnoull Graveyard, Perth; Find No 7; Catalogue No 12

Cufflinks and other fittings (Illus 1 and 2)

A decorated cufflink (12) was found at High Street, Paisley in the fill of a slab-built drain. This type of cufflink was popular in the 19th century and into the early years of the present century. During the 19th century, turn-back cuffs became popular in preference to the starched, single cuff, and a variety of styles of cuff-link was developed. A design depicting a running wolf or hound is present on this example. Houart (1977, 10) notes that the practice of incorporating animal designs onto buttons (and presumably this also applies to other accessories such as cufflinks) began in the 18th century, when the first hunting buttons were produced in France and England. Most buttons decorated with animal designs date from the second half of the 19th century, when the stamped picture button became fashionable.

No 13 is part of a device used to fasten articles of women's costume, for example corsets and petticoats, in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This type of fastener is illustrated by Bradfield (1981, 310, 324).

Since its invention the watch, with its chain and attachments, has been amongst the most decorative of gentlemen's dress accessories. No 14 is a T-bar fitting, probably from either an albert chain or a leontine, both of which were used with watches in the 19th century. Prince Albert apparently started the custom of wearing the watch chain horizontally, from pocket to pocket of his waistcoat, giving such chains the name 'alberts' (Eckstein, Firkins and Firkins 1987, 5). A leontine was a shorter form of watch chain which could be worn from the top pocket of a coat or jacket when a waistcoat was not being worn (ibid, 7).

12. Cufflink. Each plate: length 17mm; width 11 mm; thickness including eye 5mm
Copper alloy cufflink consisting of two oval plates

with circular eyes on the reverse, linked together by a looped wire, which is distorted. The obverse of each plate is decorated by a stamped or moulded design depicting a running wolf or hound, surmounted by the legend 'ALLIO'.

High Street, Paisley; Find No 17; Catalogue No 8

13. Fastener. Length 24mm; width 12mm; thickness 5mm
Part of a loop and stud fastening device, consisting of a fine, iron wire spring with a copper alloy loop at its terminal.

South Castle Street, St Andrews; Find No 45; Catalogue No 9

14. T-bar fitting. Length 39mm; max. thickness 6mm
T-bar from a watch chain, consisting of a circular cross-sectioned, copper alloy bar bisected by a transverse circular disc at its mid-point. The disc bears a scar where the now missing suspension loop for the chain was attached. A stamped or moulded legend on one side of the bar reads 'SA MM TINE SILVER ...REG. No 90006'.

123-33 High Street, Elgin; Find No 32; Catalogue No 19

Lace tags (Illus 2)

Lace tags (also known as aglets or points) were used to terminate laces or thongs from garments or shoes. Throughout the late medieval period and into the 17th century, lace tags would have had a multiplicity of uses in fastening various types of clothing, for example leather jerkins or long stockings (Cunnington and Cunnington 1972, 26, 160). This multiplicity of uses is borne out by the archaeological evidence. None of the 14 lace tags found in excavations at Leicester (Clay 1981, 137), for example, was associated with the large number of laced shoes recovered there, indicating that the tags were used on clothing laces rather than specifically with shoes.

At Northampton, two distinct types of lace tag were identified (Oakley 1979, 262). Type 1 tags, made from a piece of copper alloy sheet just wide enough to encircle the end of the lace and then secured by a rivet, cover a broad date range at Northampton, the majority from 15th- to 17th-century contexts. Type 2 tags, with their edges folded inwards towards the centre to grip the lace, are dated to the mid-16th to 17th centuries. One of 18 lace tags found in excavations at Meal Vennel, Perth (Cox forthcoming a) (16) is an example of Oakley's Type 1, although there is no evidence of a rivet. It was recovered from a 16th- or 17th-century context.

One of the lace tags found at Elgin (15) was either deliberately decorated or, alternatively, may have been fabricated from a fragment of previously decorated sheet (Cox forthcoming c). A similarly decorated example was found at Abbot House, Dunfermline (this volume, No 4).

15. Lace tag. Length 27mm; diameter 3mm
Lace tag made from a rolled copper alloy sheet, tapering towards one end. Decoration in the form of a pattern of punched diamonds occurs near to both ends. The tag contains traces of the lace or thong which it terminated.
115 High Street, Elgin; Find No 302; Catalogue No 8
16. Lace tag. Length 28mm; max. diameter 3mm
Lace tag made from a tightly rolled copper alloy sheet, tapering almost to a point at one end.
Meal Vennel, Perth; Find No 1340; Catalogue No 35

Pins (Illus 2)

Pins made from drawn wire are common finds from medieval sites. Some forms used in medieval times remained popular into the post-medieval period, a notable example being a type in which the head consists of a small coil of drawn wire, wound around the top of the shaft. Through time, this basic head form was subject to a range of small modifications, mainly in its size and method of attachment to the pin shaft. Pins 17 and 18, both from Paisley, are from 18th- and 19th-century contexts, but pins of a broadly similar form, particularly that of 17, are known from 15th-century contexts in Perth (eg Ford 1987, 123, No 14). Several pins with wire-wound heads (including 19 and 20) were found at Kinnoull Graveyard, Perth, both in the post-medieval graveyard soils and in earlier subsoil deposits. These pins, where associated with inhumations, may have been used to secure shrouds, and could also have been present within coffins, securing linings and furnishings.

17. Pin. Length 35mm; width at head 2mm; diameter of shaft 1 mm
Copper alloy pin with a wire-wound head, compressed by pinching, and a circular cross-sectioned shaft. XRF analysis revealed that the pin is plated with silver.
High Street, Paisley; Find No 8; Catalogue No 11
18. Pin. Length 41 mm; width at head 2mm; diameter of shaft 1 mm
Copper alloy pin with a wire-wound head. The head has been modified by pinching to produce a nearly spherical form. There is a kink at mid-shaft.
High Street, Paisley; Find No 26; Catalogue No 13
19. Pin. Length 41 mm; width of head 2mm; diameter of shaft 1 mm
Copper alloy pin with a circular cross-sectioned shaft and a pinched, wire-wound head. Corroded.
Kinnoull Graveyard, Perth; Find No 3; Catalogue No 4
20. Pin. Length 33mm; width of head 2mm; diameter of shaft 0.9mm
Copper alloy pin with a circular cross-sectioned

shaft and a pinched, wire-wound head. Apparent traces of a white metal plating, possibly tin, survive on the shaft. Corroded.
Kinnoull Graveyard, Perth; Find No 13; Catalogue No 6

Spectacles (Illus 2)

It is generally thought that European spectacles were invented in Italy around the end of the 13th century (Davidson 1989, 4). Early spectacles consisted of two small hand magnifying glasses pivoting about a rivet. Leather spectacles were in use from about 1500 well into the 17th century, being sold mainly by itinerant pedlars and in market places (ibid). With the introduction of metal (usually copper alloy) wire for spectacle making in the 17th century and the formation of a London spectacle makers' guild, spectacles began to be made in much larger numbers than before and London established a significant reputation for their manufacture.

The illustrated spectacle frame fragment (21) was found in excavations on the High Street in Elgin (Cox forthcoming c). It is an 18th- or 19th-century example of simple design, which would have been suitable for everyday use in close-up work or for reading. By the 18th century adult literacy was increasing rapidly and newspapers had begun to be widely read. No 21 is broken in three places, at the thinnest part of the lens frame, the junction between the nose bridge and the missing lens frame, and at the surviving side arm. This perhaps highlights the fragility of spectacles of this period, which were probably subject to frequent repair and occasional replacement.

21. Spectacles. Length 61 mm; width of lens frame 32mm
Copper alloy lens frame and part of the nose bridge from a pair of spectacles, with a hinge for the side arm attached to one side. The nose bridge appears to be slightly asymmetrical.
123-33 High Street, Elgin; Find No 5; Catalogue No 44

Wire rings and eyelets (Illus 2)

Rings 22 and 23, both from Perth, are made from lengths of drawn wire with their ends twisted together. Such objects have been found at a number of other sites, for instance at Northampton (Oakley 1979, 260), Southampton (Harvey 1975, Nos 1817-20 and 1871) and Leicester (Clay 1981, 137, No 55). Most dated examples fall within a mid-15th- to 17th-century date range, and they have quite frequently been recovered in association with lace tags and small pins, indicating a probable association with costume. One of several examples from Linlithgow had been stitched onto

leather, and the suggestion was made that it may have been attached to a form of leather shroud as an eyelet, pairs of which could be coupled up with wooden toggles or pegs (Stones 1989, 159, No 222). It seems possible that, if these objects were used as eyelets, they may also have been utilised on other types of clothing, hence their widespread occurrence.

Another possible function of this type of wire ring is that it formed the eye of a hook and eye type of fastening device. The twisted stem and the immediately adjacent part of the loop may have been attached to the fabric, and a hook could have been attached to the remaining part of the loop.

A small, copper alloy eyelet (24) was one of four found in close association with a child burial at Kinnoull Graveyard, Perth. The eyelets lay in a line above the chest area of the burial and would have served as shroud or tunic fittings, through which fastening cords would have been passed.

22. Wire ring. Length 18mm; diameter of wire 1 mm
Ring made from a length of circular cross-sectioned, drawn copper alloy wire with twisted terminals.
Meal Vennel, Perth; Find No 1350; Catalogue No 40
23. Wire ring. Length 16mm; width 12mm; diameter of wire 1 mm
Ring made from a length of circular cross-sectioned, drawn copper alloy wire with twisted terminals.
Scott Street, Perth; Find No 5; Catalogue No 6
24. Eyelet. Diameter 13mm; thickness 2mm
Circular, copper alloy eyelet. Heavily corroded.
Kinnoull Graveyard, Perth; Find No 2; Catalogue No 1

Conclusions

The study of dress accessories, artefacts which, though designed to be functional, also reflect personal tastes, brings us close to the needs and preferences of the people who populated the past. Changing fashions and social values are reflected in all kinds of personal accessories, and this has led to the quite rapid evolution of some types, while others changed only very slowly. Some of the artefacts discussed above mirror the designs of their medieval and earlier predecessors, while others represent forms which emerged only in post-medieval times. In archaeological terms, one is always conscious that only a partial record of past artefact assemblages survives for us to examine. The composition of the archaeological record is influenced by selective processes affecting which material enters the archaeology and by a range of post-depositional processes.

This paper covers but a single aspect of the artefactual evidence from recent urban excavations, which have revealed to us a great deal of

information, not only about the lives of people in medieval towns but also about the lives of those who populated the centuries which followed.

Acknowledgments

My thanks are due to Catherine Smith for her species identifications of the bone buttons, to Paul Harrison for his XRF analysis of a pin from Paisley, and to Olwyn Owen for her helpful comments on this paper. The illustrations are by Dave Munro (Illus 1, Nos 1, 5-9 and 11; Illus 2, Nos 15, 19, 20, 23 and 24), Frank Moran (Illus 1, Nos 3, 4 and 12; Illus 2, Nos 16, 17, 18 and 22) and the author (Illus 1, Nos 2, 10 and 13; Illus 2, Nos 14 and 21).

This paper is published with the aid of a grant from Historic Scotland.

References

- Bradfield, N 1981 *Costume in Detail: Women's Dress, 1730-1930*, (London).
- Clay, P 1981 'The small finds - non-structural', in Mellor, J E and Pearce, T, *The Austin Friars, Leicester*, (London).
- Cox, A 1994 'The finds, in Bowler, D and Cachart, R, 'Tay Street, Perth: the excavation of an early harbour site', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 124 (1994), 467-489.
- Cox, A forthcoming a. 'Finds from Meal Vennel', in Cox, A, Blanchard, L, Burrows, J M, Sermon, R S, Cheer, P, Smith, C and Clark, P R, 'Backland activities in medieval Perth: excavations at Meal Vennel and Scott Street', *Proc SocAntiq Scot*.
- Cox, A forthcoming b. 'Excavations at 7, South Castle Street, St Andrews', in Rains, M (ed), *A Decade of Excavations in St Andrews 1979-89*.
- Cox, A forthcoming c. 'The finds', in Hall, D W, *Excavations at 115 and 123-33 High Street, Elgin*.
- Cunnington, C W and Cunnington, P 1972 *Handbook of English Costume in the 17th Century*, (London).
- Cunnington, P 1981 *Costume in Pictures*, (revised edition) (London).
- Davidson, D C 1989 *Spectacles, Lorgnettes and Monocles*, (Princes Risborough)
- Eckstein, J, Firkins, J and Firkins, G 1987 *Gentlemen's Dress Accessories*, (Princes Risborough).
- Ewing, E 1984 *Everyday Dress 1650-1900*, (London).
- Ford, B 1987 'The copper alloy objects', in Holdsworth, P (ed), *Excavations in the Medieval Burgh of Perth, 1979-81*, (Edinburgh).

- Harvey, Y 1975 'The small finds', in Platt, C and Coleman-Smith, R (ed), *Excavations in Medieval Southampton, 1953-1969, vol 2, The Finds*, 254-313, (Leicester).
- Houart, V 1977 *Buttons: A Collector's Guide*, (London).
- Oakley, G E 1979 'The copper alloy objects', in Williams, J H, *St Peter's Street, Northampton; Excavations 1973-1976*, 248-264, (Northampton).
- Peacock, P 1978 *Discovering Old Buttons*, (Princes Risborough).
- Stones, J A 1989 'The small finds: summary report', in Stones, J A (ed), *Three Scottish Carmelite Friaries*, 147-163, (Edinburgh).

Abstract

A range of dress accessories found during recent urban excavations in Tayside, Fife and elsewhere in Scotland is discussed in this paper. The artefacts are considered from both an archaeological and a socio-historical perspective.

Key words: post-medieval, clothing, buttons