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# Grave consequences: a consideration of the artefact evidence from four post-medieval graveyard excavations

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe the artefact assemblages recovered from four recent graveyard excavations, and to explore the range of evidence and conclusions that can be drawn from such finds. Consideration is given to how the results from small-scale rescue excavations in post-medieval graveyards might be used to form inferences about social and psychological aspects of communities and to explore what they can tell us about customs, beliefs and social hierarchies.

The artefacts described here were found in association with inhumations of mainly 18th- and 19th-century date. As is true of all archaeological material, the evidence they provide is limited but it allows us to reflect upon the character of a society caught up in a quickening process of industrial change.

Artefacts recovered from four excavations, undertaken by the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust between 1994 and 1997, are considered in this paper. Two of the excavations took place in Perth, a rapidly expanding town during the 18th and 19th centuries. Another took place in Leslie, a smaller community which was, at least for a time, largely spared from rapid industrial expansion. The final site under consideration is at Dunino, in an even more rural setting. An opportunity is taken to consider how far any subtle differences in burial practices and in attitudes to death between communities of different character and size can be deduced from an examination of graveyard sites and their associated artefactual remains.

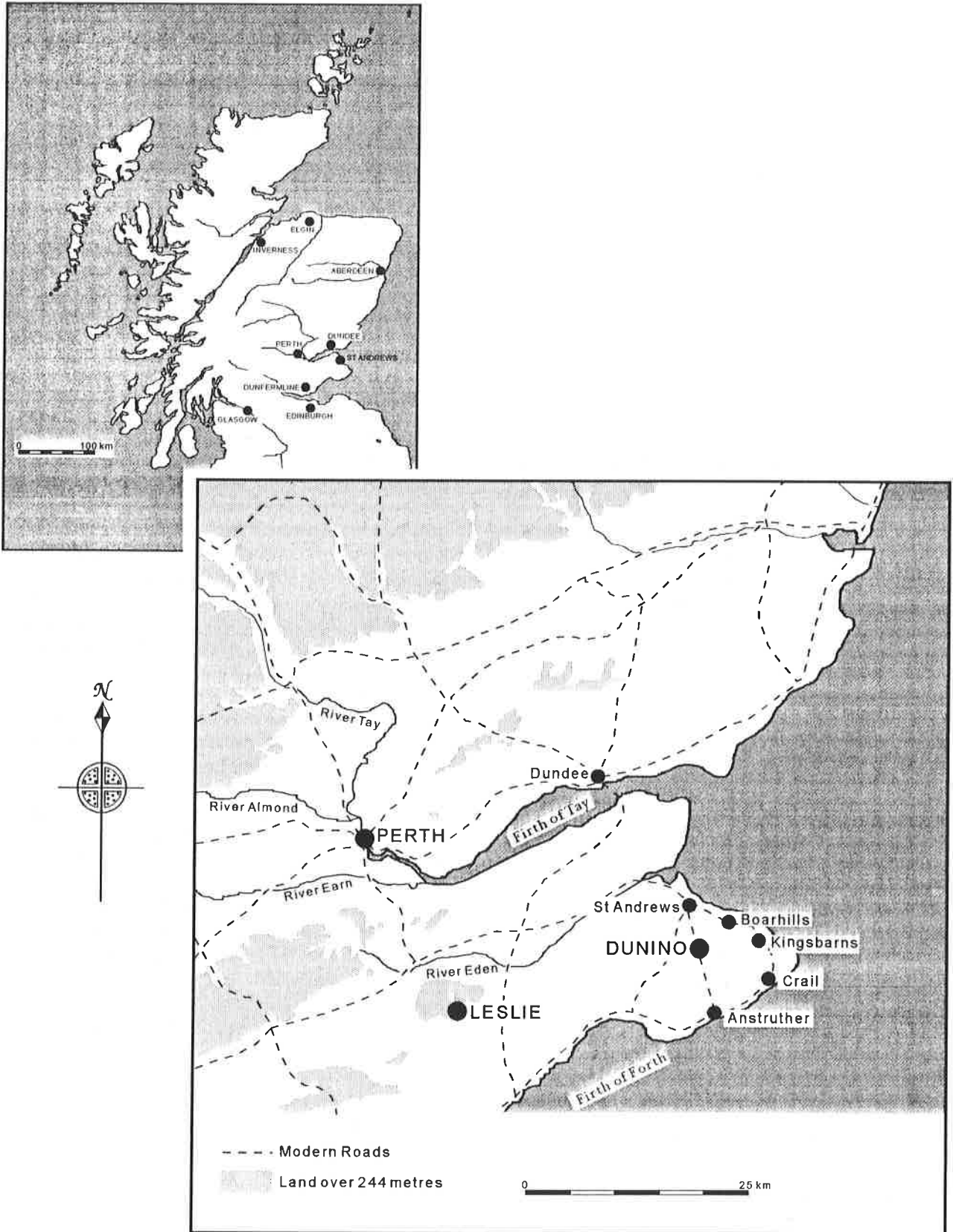
The archaeological evidence provides us with glimpses of a society in which attitudes to death were different to those of modern society. This paper examines to what extent the material remains might reflect these differences, and to what extent the customs and beliefs prevalent in 18th- and 19th-century communities are visible in the archaeological record.

## The excavations (Illus 1)

In January 1995 the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust undertook excavations in conjunction with drainage work around the recently refurbished Kinnoull Aisle, constructed in 1635 (NO 123 233) in the medieval Kinnoull parish churchyard. The work consisted of excavating three trenches around the aisle and a further trench and a soak-away in the graveyard. Archaeological deposits relating to the graveyard and aisle were revealed (Cachart and Cox 1995).

During April and May of the same year, the Trust undertook an excavation in the south-western corner of the Kinnoull Church graveyard (NO 122 232) in advance of the replacement of a section of the graveyard revetting wall, which had become unstable. The foundations of the old wall were to be removed and a new wall with a massive concrete foundation constructed, requiring the excavation of a deep trench inside the graveyard. Archaeological excavation was considered necessary to deal with the human remains in a sensitive manner and to identify and record any evidence of early inhumations, deposits or features relating to the original Kinnoull Church. During this work (Cachart 1995), the remains of over 50, mainly coffined, burials dating from the 18th and 19th centuries were recorded. The human bone was subsequently re-interred in the graveyard.

Christ's Kirk on the Green stands at the eastern end of Leslie High Street, facing the town's medieval green (NO 255 021). Built in 1820, the church replaced an earlier structure which stood a little way to the north. The 1820 church was extended southwards in the 1860s, resulting in its present-day form. Declining congregations forced the church into disuse. After an archaeological assessment in 1993, an excavation was carried out by the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust the



*Illus 1. Location map.*

following year (Falconer and Cox 1994) to record and remove threatened human remains lying within the church walls in a controlled manner prior to the church's conversion into flats. Here too, the human remains were subsequently re-interred.

An excavation and watching brief by the Trust during construction of a new vestry at Dunino Church (NO 541 109) demonstrated that the west wall of the early-19th-century church re-used an earlier foundation. Also found was a much earlier

foundation, possibly part of a pre-Reformation church. Charnel deposits, probably disturbed in the early 19th century, were found and reburied (Bowler 1997).

### The finds (Illus 2–4)

The finds assemblages recovered from these four excavations offer a number of insights into burial practices. Examined together, they provide a greater level of interpretative value than they might singly. Coffin furniture and costume and shroud fittings are the functional categories best represented by the material, although several artefacts lie outside these definitions. The finds are described below, within functional categories.

#### Coffin furniture

The finds assemblage from the Kinnoull graveyard excavation includes several different components of coffins, including small fragments of wood from their sides, lids and bases, associated iron nails, evidence of coffin lining materials, and a group of handles. Some of this material was associated with articulated burials, whereas some was recovered from graveyard soil deposits, which produced mixed, disarticulated human remains and coffin fragments of varying date.

Within the range of coffin handle fragments recovered from this site, three broad types of handle can be recognised. The most abundant is a type with a curved, iron handle which has its ends inserted into eye bolts (eg nos 7–9). The eye bolts secured both the iron handle and a thin sheet-metal backing plate onto the side of the coffin. Coffin handles of this type were also found at Kinnoull Aisle and Leslie, and a single example was recovered at Dunino (no 21).

A range of sizes of this type of coffin handle was recovered from both Kinnoull excavations. From the Kinnoull graveyard site, no 7, for example, is little more than half the length of nos 8 and 9. A majority of those which are complete enough to allow measurement are between 110 and 125mm in length, although a slightly more robust example measures c 150mm. These size differences may be a consequence of the manufacture of different sizes of coffin, for adults, juveniles and young children. Also, a different size of handle may have been used on the coffin sides from that used on its ends.

This form of handle would appear to be the earliest of the three broad varieties represented in the Kinnoull graveyard assemblage, although it may have continued in use for at least several decades, probably with variations in the style of the backing plates. At Kinnoull graveyard, handles of this type were found in direct association with coffined burials. At the Kinnoull Aisle site, they

came largely from disturbed material but had small fragments of wood attached to the shanks of the bolts, indicating that they had been used on coffins. Similar coffin handles have been recorded from other graveyard excavations. At St Benedict's Church, Norwich, a range of shapes (rectangular, D-shaped and bag shaped) was noted in handles of similar constructional form, likely to be of 18th- or 19th-century date (Goodall 1993, 82, fig 46, nos 509–21). Examples were also found at St Martin's Church, Wharram Percy, North Yorkshire (Harding 1987, 150–3). More elaborate variants were recorded at Haddington (Caldwell 1976, 32–3).

A heavier and more robust type of handle, of which no 10 is an example, was also found in direct association with coffined burials. This type, all examples of which are heavily corroded, comprises a D-shaped handle which hinges around a central, roughly cruciform boss. Interestingly, the means of this handle's attachment to the coffin would not allow the weight of the coffin to be supported, hence the handles would appear to be purely decorative, rather than functional, features.

The third type of handle represented is made of brass and consists of a ring attached to an embossed backing plate. No 2 is the most complete surviving example of this type. This is very likely to be the most recent of the handle types represented at Kinnoull graveyard.

Iron rings from coffins were also recovered at Kinnoull graveyard. In at least two cases, rings measuring c 105mm in diameter may have been attached to the interior of the coffin, on top of its textile lining, or, alternatively, the rings may have been external but attached over the top of a cloth cover to the coffin. If they were fitted externally, they may have been used when lowering the coffin into the grave. In the 19th century, black-cloth-covered coffins were common. The use of cloth to cover the coffin could disguise a plain, white-wood construction and also provided a look of solemnity (Gordon 1984, 35).

At Leslie, the shapes of decayed coffins could be ascertained from the staining of immediately underlying deposits and from the disposition of associated nails. Shouldered coffins, tapering towards the feet, appeared to predominate. Heavily corroded iron handles also survived in some cases. The coffins of which most detail could be discerned appeared to be of an almost identical type, probably the products of a local joiner or undertaker who may have enjoyed something of a monopoly, for a time at least. Trevor May (1996, 5) notes that undertaking was frequently combined with other enterprises, such as the hiring out of horses and carriages, and that this was the norm in smaller towns and rural areas.

Finds from the excavations adjacent to Kinnoull Aisle included fragments of a decorated tin strip, 21mm in width and 0.4mm in thickness, still

highly malleable despite a period of burial. The decoration consists of a repeating pattern of embossed, foliate patterns and regularly spaced circles. The largest surviving fragment of this strip measures 91mm in length. It appears to have been attached to a wooden surface, probably the side or top of a coffin, by small tacks. Small fragments of embossed tin sheet from Leslie also probably represent evidence of decorative mounts tacked onto coffins. It is known that flimsy decorations stamped from sheet tin were attached to the sides of coffins in the Victorian period to add greater 'dignity' to cheaper coffins (May 1996, 7).

The best-preserved evidence of coffin lining or covering material came from one of the later coffin burials at Kinnoull graveyard. Fragments of a coarse, woollen lining or covering came from this coffin, and there were also fragments of a lining material made from compressed wood shavings or straw, covered by a thin layer of a tar-like substance. A pack of straw was found in a number of the post-medieval coffins excavated in St Paul's church, Antwerp, either used as a pillow beneath the head or spread out over the surface of the coffin (Veckman 1997, 74). There, too, a tar-like substance was used to seal the coffins (*ibid*, 72). Small pieces of twine or rope were found in association with another of the Kinnoull graveyard burials, probably representing parts of the internal furnishings of a coffin.

#### Costume and shroud fittings

Four buttons were recovered from Kinnoull graveyard. Two of these (including no 1) are of copper alloy and are of similar construction, although no 1 has two stitch holes while the other button (a more heavily corroded example) appears to have four. A small button, of mid-19th-century type and probably made from glass (no 11), was found in association with a child burial, and an extremely fragile fragment of a button made from mother-of-pearl (no 12) was found with one of the deepest adult burials. An incomplete copper-alloy button found at Leslie (no 14) is of a three-piece type introduced in the early 19th century. A very fragmentary safety pin was associated with one of the later burials at Kinnoull graveyard. Given their contexts, these buttons and the safety pin may be interpreted as parts of the clothing in which deceased individuals were buried.

A cufflink recovered from a shroud burial at Leslie (no 15) is an 18th-century type, incorporating a slightly dumbbell-shaped loop linking the head and back. Various types of cufflink were developed during the 18th and 19th centuries, the principal aim being to make it as easy as possible to push the head or stud through the two pieces of cuff with one hand (Eckstein, Firkins and Firkins 1987, 12).

Groups of pins were recovered from several of the Leslie graves, and, where possible, the position of these in relation to the inhumations was recorded. This demonstrated that the pins had almost certainly been used to secure simple textile shrouds around the bodies, pinned at the waist and at the shoulder. Smaller numbers of pins were also recovered from later, coffined burials, but in these cases it remains uncertain whether they had secured shrouds, clothing or coffin furnishings. Several pins and pin fragments (including nos 4–6) were found at Kinnoull graveyard. Those found in close association with coffined burials may, again, have served a variety of possible functions.

The single pin found at Dunino (no 20) is of unusually elongated form. It is probably of 17th- or 18th-century date, and possibly served a quite specialised function, perhaps as a hat pin or to secure a shroud.

A small, copper-alloy eyelet (no 2) was one of four recovered from a child burial at Kinnoull graveyard. The eyelets lay in a line above the chest area, and would have served as shroud or tunic fittings, through which fastening cords would have been passed.

#### Coins

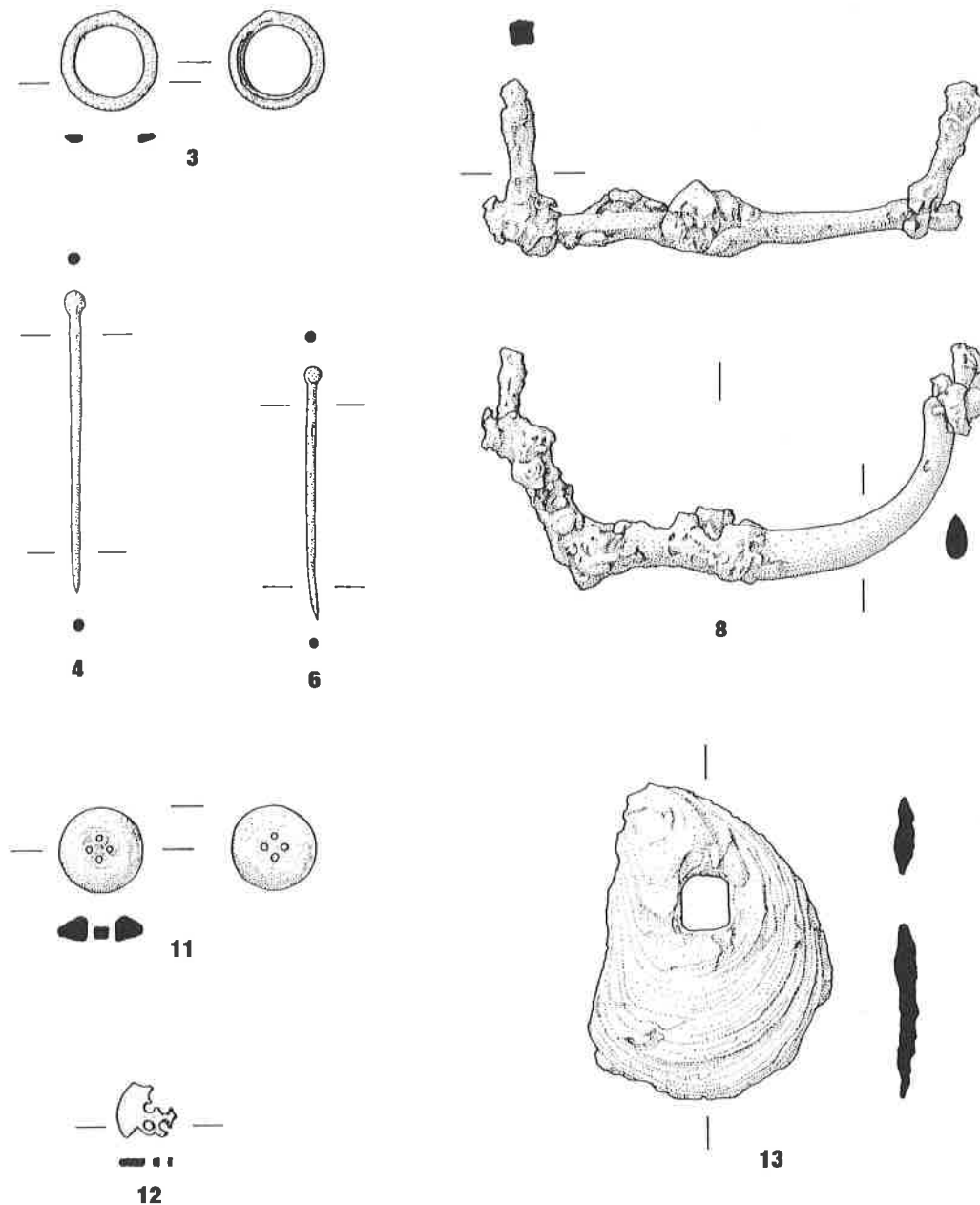
At Kinnoull graveyard, a halfpenny of Queen Victoria, of the type in circulation between 1837 and c 1860, was found placed on the chest of a child burial. Another probable coin, with its surface detail obscured by dark corrosion products, was found during the excavation at Kinnoull Aisle.

#### Miscellaneous finds

A needle with a circular eye (no 16) came from a graveyard soil deposit at Leslie. Needles such as this one were products of a cottage industry until the early part of the 18th century, when needle manufacture began to be mechanised.

A small clump of sheep's wool (no 19) was found in association with one of the coffin burials at Leslie. Staining caused by the decay of the coffin appeared to overlie the wool, indicating that it had lain on the bottom of the grave before the coffin was lowered in.

An oyster shell with a single, roughly square perforation cut through its thicker end (no 13) was recovered from the back-fill of the grave cut of one of the deepest burials recorded during the excavation. The burial itself was not excavated, but it seems possible that this shell was associated with it, being placed deliberately in the fill of the grave and perhaps having some religious or ceremonial significance. Several other oyster shells were recovered from the excavation, although not directly related to individual inhumations. As the



Illus 2. Artefacts from Kinnoull Graveyard. Nos 3, 4, 6, 11 and 12 scale 1:1; nos 8 and 13 scale 1:2.

site is adjacent to the River Tay, oyster shells are abundant locally. Perforated examples have previously been recovered from an excavation at Kirk Close, Perth, from a 14th-century midden (Ford 1987, 153). These medieval examples have smaller, less regular perforations, positioned closer to the edges of the shells. It is not impossible that the Kinnoull graveyard shell is also of medieval date, as there has been a church on the site since the early 13th century (SUAT 1991, 1) and fragments of medieval pottery and floor tile were found during the nearby excavation at Kinnoull Aisle.

## Catalogue

A select catalogue of finds from the excavations is presented below, organised by site and material

type. Finds from the Kinnoull Aisle excavation have not been catalogued. Measurements are expressed to the nearest 1mm, except where they are less than this, when they are expressed to the nearest 0.1mm.

### Finds from Kinnoull graveyard (Illus 2)

#### Copper-alloy objects

##### 1. Button. Diameter 16mm; thickness 2mm.

Circular button with a slightly raised rim and two closely set, circular holes at its centre. The button was possibly made in two pieces. Heavily corroded. (Not illustrated.)

Find no 1.

##### 2. Coffin handle and backing plate. Handle: diameter 99mm; thickness 12mm. Backing plate: width

153mm; depth 129mm; thickness c 1mm.  
Brass handle in the form of a circular, square cross-sectioned ring, with a simple hinge securing it to a roughly heart-shaped, sheet brass backing plate. The backing plate bears embossed, spiral motifs, one at each side, and was secured to the side of the coffin by two screws or nails, one positioned vertically above the other. Only corroded fragments of these survive. (Not illustrated.)  
Find no 12.

**3. Eyelet.** Diameter 13mm; thickness 2mm.

Circular eyelet. Heavily corroded.  
Find no 2.

**4. Pin.** Length 41mm; width of head 2mm; diameter of shaft 1mm.

Pin with a circular cross-sectioned shaft and a pinched, wire-wound head. Corroded.  
Find no 3.

**5. Pin.** Length 21mm; width of head c 1mm; diameter of shaft 0.7mm.

Pin in two conjoining fragments, with a circular cross-sectioned shaft and a circular head, possibly made in one piece with the shaft. The point of the pin is missing. (Not illustrated.)  
Find no 4.

**6. Pin.** Length 33mm; width of head 2mm; diameter of shaft 0.9mm.

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.  
Find no 13.

#### Iron objects

**7. Coffin handle and backing plate.** Handle: length 65mm; width c 25mm; thickness c 6mm. Backing plate: width c 105mm; depth c 85mm; thickness c 1mm. Curved, iron handle of elliptical cross-section, with its ends inserted into eye bolts which would have secured the handle to the side of the coffin. The eye bolts were also inserted through a backing plate of thin, malleable silver metal, possibly a lead or tin alloy. The backing plate has a decorative border with short, radial projections. Heavily corroded. (Not illustrated.)  
Find no 10.

**8. Coffin handle component.** Length 117mm; width c 42mm; thickness 8mm.  
Curved handle of elliptical cross-section, with its ends inserted into L-shaped eye bolts which would have secured the handle to the side of the coffin. Corroded.  
Find no 5.

**9. Coffin handle and backing plate.** Handle: length c 122mm; width c 35mm; thickness 8mm. Backing plate: Surviving width 101mm; depth 116mm; thickness 0.9mm.  
Curved, iron handle of elliptical cross-section, with its ends inserted into eye bolts which would have secured the handle to the side of the coffin. The

eye bolts, which have wood remains attached, were also inserted through a backing plate of thin, malleable silver metal, probably tin. Only a fragment of the backing plate survives but it had a decorative border. Heavily corroded. (Not illustrated.)

Find no 9.

**10. Coffin handle.** Width 110mm; depth 81mm; max thickness 14mm.

Robust, D-shaped iron handle, hinged around a cruciform boss. The handle was attached to the side of the coffin by a single screw, projecting from the rear of the boss. A groove runs along the rear face of the handle. (Not illustrated.)

Find no 11.

#### Probable glass button

**11. Button.** Diameter 11mm; 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.

Find no 6.

#### Shell objects

**12. Button fragment.** Original diameter c 11mm; thickness c 1mm.

Fragment of a circular button made from mother-of-pearl, with four closely set, circular holes at its centre.

Find no 7.

**13. Perforated shell.** Length 87mm; width 66mm; max thickness 5mm.

Shell of a common or European oyster (*Ostrea edulis*), with a rectangular hole (14mm by 13mm) cut through it, near to its thicker, narrower end.

Find no 8.

#### Finds from Leslie (Illus 3)

#### Copper-alloy objects

**14. Button.** Diameter 20mm; width of eye 7mm; thickness (including eye) 9mm.

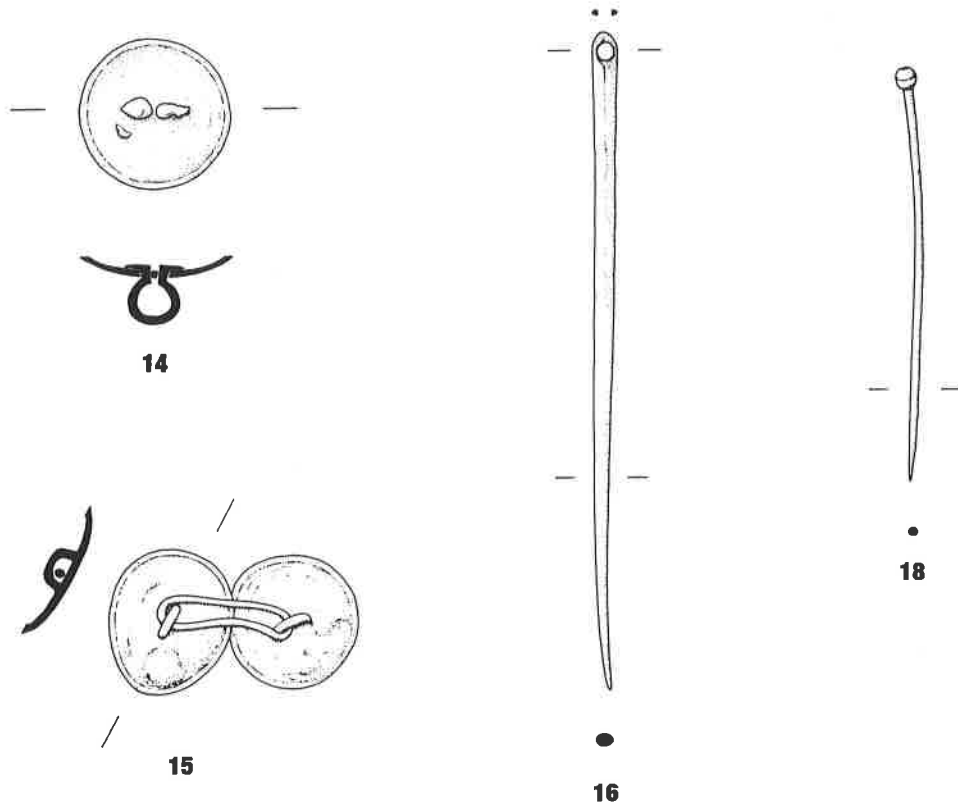
Part of a three-piece button, the face of which is missing. The button back is of concavo-convex form with a narrow rim around its edge. The terminals of the circular eye, made from circular cross-sectioned wire, have been inserted through the button back and hammered flat to secure the eye.

Find no 1.

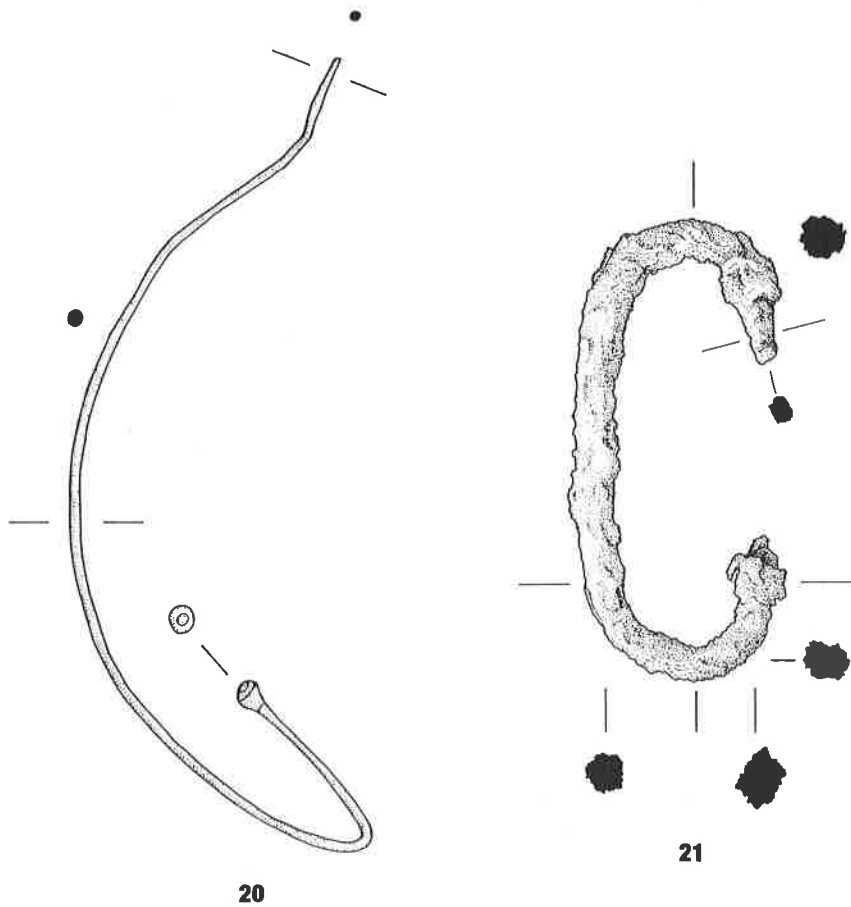
**15. Cufflink.** Length 34mm; width 17mm; thickness 6mm.

Cufflink consisting of two oval (almost circular) studs with their sub-rectangular eyes linked by an elongated wire loop. The loop narrows slightly in its central section to produce an elongated dumbbell shape. Any decoration on the faces of the studs is obscured by heavy corrosion.

Find no 2.



*Illus 3. Artefacts from Leslie. Scale 1:1.*



*Illus 4. Artefacts from Dunino. No 20 scale 1:1; no 21 scale 1:2.*

16. Needle. Length 87mm; width at eye 4mm.  
Complete needle of circular cross-section, flattened near the eye to a sub-rectangular cross-section. The eye itself is circular. The shaft curves near the tip.  
Find no 3.
17. Pin. Length 22mm; width of head 2mm; diameter of shaft 0.8mm.  
Complete pin with a pinched, wire-wound head and a circular cross-sectioned shaft. (Not illustrated.)  
Find no 4.
18. Pin. Length 55mm; width of head 3mm; diameter of shaft 1mm.  
Complete pin with a wire-wound head of spherical form. The top of the shaft protrudes very slightly above the head. The shaft is slightly curved.  
Find no 5.

#### Wool fibres

19. Wool. Length c 130mm.  
Piece of white to pale brown sheep's wool, with probable grass fibres entangled within it. (Not illustrated.)  
Find no 6.

#### Finds from Dunino (Illus 4)

##### Copper-alloy pin

20. Pin. Length if straightened c 155–160mm; width at head 3mm; diameter of shaft 0.9mm.  
Complete pin of elongated form, with a wire-wound head, shaped into a spherical form, and a circular cross-sectioned shaft. The shaft is angled sharply at c 30mm below the head.  
Find no 1.

##### Iron coffin handle

21. Coffin handle. Length 118mm; width 51mm; thickness 9mm.  
Coffin handle of elongated D-shaped form, with both terminals narrowed slightly, probably for insertion into eye bolts. Moderately corroded.  
Find no 2.

## Discussion

### Attitudes to death

The archaeological evidence described here provides an opportunity to consider the nature of society in the 18th and 19th centuries; a society in which attitudes to death were different to those of modern times. Although a practical necessity, the disposal of the deceased is usually complicated by strong emotions, including feelings of loss and a need for support from family members and the social group. Throughout history it has also been accompanied by a range of rituals and superstitions. There is evidence, for example, of a fear of

the spirits or ghosts of the deceased and their possible resentment at their loss of life (Merrifield 1987, 59).

There is some evidence, too, that our recent ancestors were less helpless in the face of death than modern researchers find the bereaved of today to be. Perhaps even more so than today, there was a strong element of psychological and social solace running through the funeral rituals. As Anne Gordon (1984, 9) concisely observes, death was part of life.

During the period under consideration, the role of the church was very important. Although society was undergoing great upheaval in the face of agricultural and industrial change, the secularisation of society was not an inevitable accompaniment of its rapid urbanisation, as Lynch (1992, 402) points out. The rapid rise and achievements of the Free Church movement in the 1840s, for example, were testimony to the centrality in Scottish life which religion still commanded (*ibid*, 397). Gordon Donaldson (1985, 221) draws attention to the significance of the church as a contributor to the institutional cohesion of the community.

At Leslie, a very tight spacing of the graves was noted, suggesting pressure on burial space. The agricultural and industrial revolutions witnessed large-scale movements of the population into towns, increasing the pressures on their limited facilities for burial. The census records an increase of 40% in the population of Leslie between 1801 and 1821, for instance. When the new church was built there in 1820, it appears from the archaeological evidence that even recently placed headstones were removed and inhumations were disturbed (Falconer 1994). There was also evidence at Leslie of graves being disturbed to make way for later burials, a practice also indicated by evidence from London (Harding 1992, 128).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, when most people did not venture very far from their own communities, they were inevitably influenced by the particular local beliefs and superstitions of their communities. Fear of the devil was very strong, and belief in the evil eye and in witchcraft was widespread. There was a widespread acceptance that the hand of fate was present at every turn (Livingstone 1996, 49). There appear to have been numerous local and regional superstitions surrounding illness and death. Natural events could be interpreted as signs or omens, foretelling impending doom. A raven flying over a house, for example, could signal that the death of the occupant could be imminent, and the sight of sparrows hovering around a house could also be viewed as a bad omen, foretelling the death of a child (*ibid*, 50). In coastal communities, many interments were delayed until the tide was ebbing, and in some communities Friday was not considered a good day for a burial (*ibid*, 69).



## The significance of artefacts in graves

We might consider to what extent any evidence of such beliefs and superstitions could survive and be visible in the archaeological record. Of course, articles interred with the dead vary in significance. Some may be objects closely associated with the dead person, and they may provide clues to the role and status of that person in life. This group includes objects that formed components of the individual's clothing when they were buried. Examples described above most probably include the cufflink recovered from Leslie and the buttons of different types found there and at Kinnoull graveyard. It seems possible that items would have been selected with great care. Although we cannot know for certain, they may have held some special significance to the deceased, or indeed to bereaved relatives.

Among the more obviously deliberate acts visible to us from the evidence described above was the placing of a coin upon the chest of a deceased child interred at Kinnoull graveyard. The custom of burying a coin with a deceased person is in fact a very ancient one. In ancient Greece, coins were commonly placed in the mouths of the dead, as it was customary for a bundle of small coins to be carried in the cheek. They were also placed near the head, in the hands, or around the legs. The offering of a coin continued to be a symbolic gesture in Roman times (Merrifield 1987, 68). Archaeological work in the Cathedral of Our Lady, Antwerp (Veeckman 1997, 74) revealed a large number of coins placed intentionally within the coffins of post-medieval burials. There appeared to be no fixed pattern to the position of coins within the coffin and it is assumed that they were simply thrown in.

Finds such as these generally involve small coins of low denomination – for example the half-penny from Kinnoull graveyard – and this leads to the assumption that the symbolic value of the coins was greater than their nominal one. More than a single theory to explain the significance of coins in graves has been advanced. Livingstone (1996, 58) points to the custom of placing coins upon the eyelids of the deceased in order to keep the eyes closed, in case the departing spirit might seek a companion. Other authors suggest that a small coin might have been considered useful to enable the dead person to pay for their crossing into the hereafter. Perhaps, as with many such rituals, the true significance has become somewhat obscured.

Even today, coins play a role in the minor rituals practised by individuals, who may toss a small coin into a fountain or well in the hope that in so doing they may be blessed with good fortune. Another custom that has persisted since Roman times is the placing of a coin in the mast-step of a ship as a good luck token, a practice known to

builders of wooden sailing ships in recent times (Merrifield 1987, 54).

Among the items recovered from the four excavations considered here, the perforated oyster shell from Kinnoull graveyard and the clump of sheep's wool from Leslie pose particular questions. Although one must make an allowance for holes made in shells by birds, the oyster shell from Kinnoull graveyard appears to have been deliberately perforated, and there seems to be a strong possibility that it was a deliberate inclusion in a grave fill. Shells worn from the neck are sometimes tentatively interpreted as symbols of pilgrimage, and this example may have held some significance for the occupant of this grave.

Throughout the sheep-raising areas of Scotland a particular custom has been reserved for the funerals of shepherds. This custom was practised as recently as the 1960s in the Borders and possibly even more recently in some areas (Gordon 1984, 100). A little sheep's wool was dropped into the grave before the coffin was lowered, said to be either symbolic of the shepherd's life, or as a demonstration to St Peter that the reason why the deceased shepherd had been unable to attend church regularly was because he had had to tend his flock (*ibid.*). We cannot surmise from but a single clue that the Leslie burial was that of a shepherd, but it is a tantalising clue none the less and serves to demonstrate that, with careful recording and retrieval of the associated physical evidence, it might be possible to formulate arguments about the role or social identity of the deceased.

## Social hierarchies

It has been observed that death is a great equaliser, yet funerals afforded an opportunity for display that set the seal on a person's position in the social hierarchy. Especially in towns, the visible display of status was part of normal life and the implicit messages of funeral ritual could be addressed to a large audience. In life, social hierarchies were apparent even within a church. Edward Miall, an MP and minister, writing in 1849, stated (quoted in Golby 1986, 33):

The poor man is made to feel that he is a poor man, the rich is reminded that he is rich, in the great majority of our churches and chapels. The square pew, carpeted, perhaps, and curtained, the graduated scale of other pews ... keep up the separation between class and class; and even where the meanly-clad are not conscious of intrusion, as is sometimes painfully the case, the arrangements are generally such as to preclude in their bosoms any momentary feeling of essential equality.

Among the indicators of social hierarchy which might be preserved in the archaeological record is the coffin, with its associated fittings. The absence of a coffin is also significant, particularly in 18th- and 19th-century burials. Both coffined and un-coffined burials were recorded at Leslie. From the mid-16th century, re-usable, hinged coffins ('common coffins') were used, particularly in towns, for the burials of those who could not afford a coffin burial. After being opened at the graveside or lowered part way into the grave, these coffins could be used again, while the deceased were buried in shrouds. In times of famine and epidemics, the common coffin was widely used. Gordon (1984, 33) notes that, in the pestilence of 1645, the common coffin of Anstruther was used fifteen times in a single day. The practice of burying paupers un-coffined continued in Scotland until the mid-18th century and in some places as late as the mid-19th century (*ibid*). A wide range of people, of course, fell below the level of a high quality coffin but above that of pauper, and could afford a coffin but not an expensive one. Simple wooden coffins might be made by a local joiner, and the presence of numerous similar coffins at Leslie may provide evidence of this practice.

To some extent we are able to detect from the archaeological evidence whether the deceased was likely to have come from a background of relative wealth or relative poverty, although the aim of everyone was a decent funeral and the evidence in the grave may mask some of the differences in status. Where it can be recognised, physical evidence of higher social status has come from Kinnoull rather than from Leslie, although sampling bias and a variety of other factors may account for this.

## Conclusions

An analysis such as this raises many new questions and leaves many unanswered. It is clear, however, that valuable information about the lives of our recent ancestors can be extracted from the material evidence recovered from these post-medieval graveyard excavations. Tribute must be paid to the skill of the excavators for the recovery of such a broad range of evidence, despite the constraints of rescue circumstances, and perhaps with more closely targeted recording methods we could address more of the questions unanswered here.

It has been observed (Historic Scotland 1997, 4) that of all archaeological activities, the excavation of human remains is perhaps most closely associated in the public imagination with the role of the archaeologist. Particularly in this area, we are reminded of the need to adopt the highest ethical standards. The study of human remains and asso-

ciated artefacts also reminds us that archaeology is crucially about people, and of how privileged we are to be permitted sometimes quite personal insights into the lives, and deaths, of our ancestors.

## Acknowledgments

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## Abstract

*Artefacts recovered during rescue excavations at four post-medieval graveyard sites are described, and their significance discussed, in this paper. Consideration is given to how the results from small-scale investigations such as these might be used to form inferences about social and psychological aspects of communities and to explore what they can tell us about customs, beliefs and social hierarchies.*

Keywords: artefacts, post-medieval, graveyards, customs

