

Whalebones found during tram works

The teams working on Trams to Newhaven have begun digging again and have shown off some of the artefacts they have uncovered.

Some of these were dug up around Constitution Street and are of historical importance. Ranging from whale bones to a 17th century cannonball they are all an important part of the area's history.



There are also possible relics of Leith's 16th and 17th century town defences, as well as evidence that might suggest reclamation of Leith foreshore took place earlier than first thought.

Archaeologists from GUARD Technology are undertaking the work under the oversight of what is called 'swept path contractors' Morrison Utility Services.



The relics include:

- **Whale bones:** Found on Constitution Street to the north of its junction with Baltic Street, a matching radius and ulna (part of the fin) of a large adult male sperm whale. The bones have yet to be carbon dated (this has been delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic), which will help explain how they ended up under the pavement in Leith. Amongst possible theories are that they were brought back in the 19th or 20th century as a memento as part of Leith's historic whaling industry, that they came from the remains of a whale beached locally and were subsequently dumped there or that they were part of medieval deposits left there during the reclamation of the site in the 17th to 19th centuries, perhaps dating back to the medieval period.
- **Cannonball:** A small iron cannonball found in Constitution Street thought to date back to the 17th century – of a type used around the time of the Civil War when Constitution Street and Leith was refortified.
- **Historic drainage:** Excavations between Bernard Street and Tower Street have revealed important evidence relating to the reclamation of the area, including a

large system of 19th century interlinked brick and stone box-drains, 18th century walls and a possible slipway. Evidence of 17th century clay pipes also indicates that the reclamation of the area could have occurred earlier than first thought.

- **Town defences:** Prior to lockdown the heavily truncated remains of a large stone wall were discovered running east to west under the junction of Bernard Street and Constitution Street. This may be part of the seawall for the 16th and 17th century town fortifications – the team will be investigating this when the project restarts.



Council Leader Adam McVey said: "Leith has a fantastically rich heritage but these discoveries continue to expose new aspects of its fascinating, varied history.

"I'm pleased that the team will now be able to resume their work as part of the project, which is vital to conserving the area's past, and look forward to finding out even more as they progress."

Depute Leader Cammy Day said:"The Trams to Newhaven project is crucial to the long-term development of the city and this area in particular, helping to deliver much needed housing, jobs and investment for the future. As part of its delivery, it's fitting that we also learn more about Leith's past, as these remarkable findings are helping us to do."

City Archaeologist John Lawson said:"Our work to excavate the area as part of preparatory work for the Trams to Newhaven project has offered really interesting glimpses into the area's history, over the past three to four hundred years, and we're endeavouring to conserve that.

"Discoveries like the whale bones have been particularly fascinating and exciting. These bones provide a rare glimpse into and also a physical link with Leith's whaling past, one of its lesser known maritime industries and one which in the 20th century reached as far as the Antarctic. Given the circumstances of how they were found it is possible that they may date back to the medieval period, and if so would be a rare and exciting archaeological discovery in Edinburgh."

Bob Will of GUARD Archaeology Ltd added:"The Trams project will allow us to discover more about the history and development of Leith from the medieval period to the modern day. The work so far has already uncovered a range of exciting objects with a cannonball and the whale bone."

Work on Constitution Street began late last year, but stopped in March during the coronavirus pandemic.

They had already taken down a wall around Constitution Street Graveyard which dated from 1790. The large charnel pit which they discovered may contain the remains of burials recovered

when services were laid during the 19th century. Further investigation will now take place.

Work has resumed on Lindsay Road, Melrose Drive, Constitution Street, Leith Walk from Elm Row to Crown Place.

Roadworks will be in place from Friday 19 June and will be in operation from 5am on Saturday morning. This means there will be diversions on some Lothian bus routes. Leith Walk will be reduced to one city bound lane between London Road and Crown Place while the works continue.

[Trams to Newhaven](#)



A cannonball found during the Trams to Newhaven excavations