Historic Scotland podcast:

Series 2, Episode 6 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah's intro:

Hello and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name's Sarah MacGillivray. I'm an actor and writer with a passion for people, place and story.

Each episode we travel to a different site, chat to the people that take care of it and uncover its surprising story.

Today we're at Caerlaverock Castle in Dumfries, quite literally unearthing the tale of a family that spans continents and attempting to solve a problem that's had archaeologists scratching their heads for years. How did a piece of glass from the Middle East end up here? To find out, I'm chatting to Zoe Lyons, one of the stewards of Caerlaverock Castle.

Zoe:

We're kind of like the keepers of the castle, you know, and we look after it and the grounds and the visitors all at the same time.

Sarah:

I'm also meeting Judith Rowett and Lynsey Haworth, both in charge of collections.

Lynsey:

A lot of sites you find potteries that have been made like in France and imported in but for the most part what we find here at Caerlaverock, it's all Scottish-made pottery.

Judith:

So it's really exciting because sometimes when you look more closely at collections you start to see these signs of human life and the people that worked on them. So I don't know if the potter would have thought this, but we do have examples in the collection where we have incredibly clear thumbprints and it's a wonderful sort of look back. It sort of makes you just stop and think that, no, these were actually handled by real people; they're not just things that we've shoved in a cave.

Sarah:

And we're talking to Stefan North-Sagrott who's the archaeologist for the area.

Stefan:

Everything is being made for the castle and used at the castle and to have all of that together is exceptionally rare.

Chapter 2

01:41

Sarah:

Caerlaverock Castle is one of Scotland's most distinctive medieval fortresses. With its striking triangular shape, surrounded by a wide moat and set against the open landscape of Dumfries and Galloway, it's unlike almost any other castle in Britain. Caerlaverock Castle was owned by the Maxwells. It was built in the late 13th century. The castle replaced an earlier stronghold nearby and quickly became a key defensive site along Scotland's western border. Its design is as practical as it is beautiful.

Zoe:

I'm Zoe Lyons and I've been here for a couple of years. I'm one of the castle stewards. I'm in charge of helping out with crafts and arts, and I'm planning a project at the moment as well, here at the castle.

Sarah:

What's the project? Can you tell us about it?

Zoe:

It's a BioBlitz.

Sarah:

What's a BioBlitz?

Zoe:

So a BioBlitz is when all our visitors come along and help us discover every single species that we have here on site. We're doing it over a week. But we're doing it over three different months this summer because our flora and fauna changes so much here at the castle. Like every couple of weeks things change. So we're going to try and capture everything.

Sarah:

So entwined with the landscape is Caerlaverock that it's actually woven into its name. The 'caer' of Caerlaverock means castle or fort and 'laverock' means of the lark. So castle of the lark or even castle of the birds.

Zoe:

We get the geese over there so they all settle over there at the Caerlaverock wetlands. And so they come here every winter and then when it's time for them to leave, most of them are leaving at the moment, and then we'll get the arrival of the swallows who live here all summer and it's a busy nature place.

Sarah:

Fantastic, and the same with the plants and fauna and everything as well?

Zoe:

Yes, we get lots growing round about the moat and out in the woodlands. The wetlands over there, WWT wetlands. And they have lots of birds. So that's where the geese go in the winter.

Sarah:

So they're quite famous, those geese that come and stay here for the winter?

Zoe:

Yes, I think so, because at the wetlands, before the wetlands was set up, there was, like, their numbers were really reduced. I don't know, doing conservation for them and stuff, they helped to build up the numbers again.

Sarah:

Oh, so they've seen them increase?

Zoe:

Yes, they've seen them increase a lot.

Sarah:

That's amazing.

Zoe:

You know, it's really popular as well in the winter.

Sarah:

Oh, how lovely. And can you see them from the castle sometimes?

Zoe:

Sometimes, yeah. So they all settle in one of the fields just over there. And then they all just take off at the same time. So you can hear them before you see them. But then you're always watching for them. And then you catch them all flying overhead and stuff. No, they're beautiful.

Sarah:

And is it the Solway Firth we're quite close to here?

Zoe:

Yeah. So I think 800 or so years ago when the castle was active, the Firth wasn't as built up with sand and silt. But it has ever since.

Sarah:

Oh, wow. So the landscape and the environment has changed so much.

Zoe:

It has changed a lot, yeah. So when the family lived in the castle, the forest wasn't here.

Sarah:

Oh, was it not?

Zoe:

No.

Sarah:

And it looks like quite a big forest.

Zoe:

It is an ancient woodland. But it’s not as old as the castle.

Sarah:

Wow. So the castle, so it would have been much closer to the sea at the time.

Zoe:

Yes.

Sarah:

And there wouldn’t have been any of this forest. It’s quite different.

Zoe:

Yeah, so it has changed a lot. It’s lovely. Like it’s a lovely place just to come and chill out for the day and many people do.

Sarah:

Yeah, I can imagine. It’s a really strikingly beautiful castle. Like it’s in such a stunning location, all this greenery, and then it looks quite unusual as well. Because I don’t think I’ve ever seen, is it a triangle?

Zoe:

It is a triangle castle and...

Sarah:

I've never seen a triangle castle before.

Zoe:

A lot of people come here because of the unusual shape. They've seen it on social media or whatever. So when they built it, it was more like a fortress. So there was hardly any of these windows in the side and things. And the family all just lived around the edges of the castle in little buildings that they had.

By the 1600s, the family had become quite wealthy by then. And they'd upgraded the castle quite a lot. And there was a lot of changes that they made to the inside of the castle. And what we call it is Nithsdale Lodgings. And it was like luxury apartments at the time. So they added that part on to the castle in the early 1600s. And then that's the bit that they've decorated beautifully and that you can still see today.

Sarah:

So was that an indicator that the family were doing quite well then?

Zoe:

Yes, that was them showing off to the locals. They liked to show off and let everybody know that they were the men. They were the people in charge around here.

Chapter 3

06:19

Sarah:

Over the centuries, Caerlaverock was besieged, rebuilt and reshaped. But alongside these dramatic events, everyday life was also unfolding. We're going to use the terms 'old castle' and 'new castle' quite a lot in this episode. The new castle is the one built in 1277. The old one is behind it, a little further downhill, tucked into that woodland that Zoe mentioned. We're heading there right now.

And it's a discovery at the old castle that brings you and I here today. A tiny shard of glass, barely bigger than my thumb, but from thousands of miles away. I don't want to give away too much about it just yet, but the glass is believed to have come from the Middle East. Somehow, this delicate piece has crossed cultures and continents before ending up in the mud and stone of a remote Scottish castle hundreds of years ago.

So how did it get here? What does it reveal about the people who once lived at Caerlaverock? And what can it tell us about Scotland's place in a much wider medieval world? That's the mystery we're about to explore.

Zoe:

Our records go as far back as when the family first arrived here and settled. We think they were granted the land by a king. And they started off down here in like a wooden fort to begin with. And then by the early 1200s, that's when they'd gained their wealth quite a bit by then. So they decided then that they wanted to upgrade the castle. So they decided to choose a lovely, beautiful red sandstone. Now the sandstone was found at a local quarry about nine miles from here. So they would have travelled it down the Nith.

Sarah:

Oh, right, used the river to travel the stone.

Zoe:

They would have, yes. So that quarry is actually still active today.

Sarah:

Is it really?

Zoe:

A thousand years later.

Sarah:

Wow.

Zoe:

It’s been ongoing for a thousand years. And most of the houses in Dumfries have been built with the same red sandstone as the castle.

Sarah:

That’s amazing. What’s it called?

Zoe:

It’s Locharbriggs Quarry. So when they built the castle here with the stone, little did they know that it actually was a wee bit too heavy for the wet ground round here because obviously we’re in the wetlands.

Sarah:

Yes. So it just started to sink?

Zoe:

It did. It wasn't too long after they built it, they realised the castle had started to sink. This was what the old castle looked like.

Sarah:

So it was a square castle?

Zoe:

It was square, yeah. I think it was that their wooden fort was also square, so they just copied the footprint of that.

Sarah:

And they built it up with this red sandstone and how long did they live there for?

Zoe:

So they only lived in this castle for about 50 years, which isn't an awful lot in the age of castles to live. And it wasn't long after, I think it was the 50-year stage, where they started building that castle, but they took a long time trying to find somewhere to put it and that's because they didn't want it to sink.

Sarah:

Right, right. So they learned from the past mistakes and they didn't want it to sink this time.

Zoe:

They had yes. And this is one of our rarest pieces that we found here at the old castle – a piece of Arabic glass.

Chapter 4

09:19

Sarah:

I really like the sound of this Arabic glass, it's very exciting. So I found some experts in this field who can tell us a little bit more about it.

Sorry for the interruption here, but we wouldn't be able to make the Historic Scotland podcast without Historic Scotland members. If you're enjoying the episode so far, there's more waiting for you. Historic Scotland members get access to extended episodes with exclusive behind-the-scenes content and reflections that didn't make it into the public cut. Membership also gives you free entry to Historic Scotland sites across the country, free entry to daytime events, and helps support the care and conservation of the places we explore. If you'd like to hear more and help keep Scotland's stories alive, become a Historic Scotland member today. Follow the link in the episode notes for more information.

Judith:

I'm Judith Rowett, I'm the Regional Collections Manager for the southwest, so it's my responsibility to look after all the collections that we have associated with sites like Caerlaverock.

Lynsey:

I'm Lynsey Haworth. I'm the Collections Access Manager. So part of my job is research and making our collections physically and digitally accessible to different audiences.

Stefan:

And I'm Stefan North-Sagrott. I'm the Senior Cultural Resources Advisor for our south region, which in effect means I'm the archaeologist for the area. So I advise on the archaeology of our sites, on sort of creating archaeological digs to kind of understand them better and do research, and also advising colleagues when they're doing work on what other kind of protection we'll need to put in place to make sure the sites are protected.

Sarah:

And do you all work together quite a lot? Would your work all feed into each other? Do you have to be in touch?

Judith:

Yes, Lynsey and I are in the same team, so we're in the Collections team, but yes Stef and I have worked quite a lot on various projects over the years.

Stefan:

We have, sort of everything we do kind of feeds back into each other's work and things, so obviously from archaeological digs we do find objects which may eventually become collections items, which then Judith has to manage and Lynsey has to help understand and research and make accessible and things like that. And then, as Judith was saying as well, for 2018 to 2021 or something, we were doing a huge research project at Caerlaverock where we were looking at not just the collections, but the history of the castle, the archaeology, the landscape it's within.

We were kind of bringing lots of different specialists to look at historical records, to look at the woodland around the sites and to study the botany of the area. And, yeah, every single artefact, I think, was re-looked at and reappraised by specialists with new knowledge.

Sarah:

So what brought about that project in the first place? And were you looking at objects that are already in the collection and then also finding new ones?

Stefan:

Part of it was driven, the main reason was driven by our Interpretation team, who managed the signs and the guidebooks and the audio guides because they wanted to have up-to-date research to inform new interpretation of the castle. And so that kind of obviously set us a lot of research questions we already have and other ones we had when we sat down and

thought about what we wanted to do. It wasn't necessarily new technology, but just sort of new specialists and developments in the understanding of different objects and artefacts. A lot of what we have has come from excavations in the 1950s and 60s and sort of were looked at then and then put aside and things. And so it's looking at these things 60 years on.

Lynsey:

Yeah, and with the Islamic glass, we got funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council in 2022, I think it was, to undertake a community-based project. So we were using XRF analysis.

Sarah:

What's that?

Lynsey:

So XRF, it's kind of pointing an X-ray beam at an object, and that displaces the electrons in the atoms that make up the object, and it emits secondary X-rays. And those secondary X-rays are characteristic of the chemical elements that are inside an object. So we were using that on the Islamic glass. And that helped us pinpoint where it was made. So we found that soda, lime and silica glass made up the fragments of the Islamic vessel that we've got. And that helped us pinpoint that it was probably made in Egypt or Syria during the 13th century. And we were also able to use it to form a community outreach project with two Muslim groups as well. So sort of showcasing the glass to them and talking about kind of the links between Scotland and Islam and getting them to do creative activities focused around the glass as well. So it was a really lovely project and a different way to use the collections.

Sarah:

Yeah, that's amazing. I mean, there's so much going on there. Like the new, like the science that you can then use to like pinpoint it is incredible. Like, that is mind-blowing to think that you can actually do that and then know that that's where that glass came from.

Lynsey:

I think that's why carrying on research is so important because the technology and the science, you know, it's always evolving. So as the decades go by, there's new ways of us investigating things and learning new details.

Chapter 5

14:16

Sarah:

We are now at the site of the old castle. And is this the place where the Islamic glass was found then? Could you tell us about the finding of the Islamic glass?

Stefan:

The site looks very different to the new castle. There's much less of it up. In fact, there's nothing really of it standing above ground level. In the 1990s, colleagues wanted to understand more about this. Everyone thought it was probably an old castle, but there'd also been suggestions previously that it might have been a Roman fort as well because it is so square and because we know there's a fair bit of Roman activity in the area. So kind of one of the questions was, what is it and how much can we understand about it?

So fairly extensive excavations were undertaken on behalf of Historic Scotland by SUAT, which is the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust, and they excavated the entire platform site you can see here. So we've got kind of what is roughly a rectangular platform surrounded by quite a sizable moat. The moat itself is about 15 metres wide and two metres deep. And these days it's a bit marshy and things like that, but would have been full of water, as we can see in the graphic ahead of us as well.

And so, yeah, over a couple of years, they excavated the site. And within that, they found traces of a number of buildings and kind of helped establish the sequence of the site. And so we know that sort of the first phase of it, when it's being built in the early 13th century, is a timber hall. So obviously that's where kind of the work was taking place, the feastings and things like that for probably John Maxwell, who was one of the stewards for Alexander II. And as well as the hall, they also had a stone-built sort of chamber range – that's where the bedrooms and things like that would be – and at that very first stage that was it. So whilst we

call it a castle, it's more like a sort of a manor house with a moat around it. So that's quite common down in England, getting moated manor houses and things like that.

But over time, over kind of 50 years, we see they build a stone wall enclosing the area, they build these corner towers that you can see on each one of them and then they kind of extend and enhance the buildings and things like that as well. And so it was just during the excavations, whilst they were excavating the hall, that's when they found the Islamic glass in the base of it.

Sarah:

Was that quite a surprising find?

Stefan:

I think it would have probably been one of those eureka moments for any of the archaeologists finding it and they would have got very excited and been slightly confused by what they were seeing as well because, as far as we know, it was the first bit of Islamic glass found in Scotland. There's been some other bits and pieces known about from England but in Scotland, yeah, and to find it here in what is now the middle of a woods, sort of feeling quite remote, is quite a surprising thing. Obviously, back in the 13th century as well Caerlaverock wasn't as remote as it is. This was actually a much more hustling and bustling area. One of the reasons the castle is built here is to sort of, well not control the access, but watch over the access running east west across this north coast of the Solway Firth. The River Nith, which is to our west, there's a fording point on the river as well. So that's where people would cross without having to go all the way up north of Dumfries and back down again. So it's strategically a very important point. So whoever had the castle and controlled it was a fairly important person.

Sarah:

It's nice to think of it as a bustling area with all this like people coming in and out all the time as well, compared to how sort of, it feels quite remote and peaceful now. But the fact that there was so much activity, so much going on. And what makes the finding of this Islamic glass so sort of important?

Lynsey:

I guess, I mean, as Stefan says, as far as we're aware, it's the only Islamic glass that's been found on an archaeological site in Scotland. So, yeah, a really, really big find. There's a couple of theories as to how it came to be here at Caerlaverock. One of them is that it was brought back by somebody who fought in the Crusades. And the other one is that it was traded through Venice and arrived here that way.

So with the Crusades, obviously a very complex area of history, but broadly speaking, it was a series of wars that happened between the 11th and 13th centuries between predominantly, but not exclusively, Christians and Muslims. And the basic idea was that Christians wanted to recapture the Holy Land, so the areas around modern-day Israel and Palestine. And as part of that, there was fighting in some of the modern-day surrounding countries as well, including Egypt and Syria, so where we think our glass may have come from. And it could be that somebody who was fighting and was over there came back and brought these back with them, sort of as a souvenir.

There is evidence that Scots were going out to fight in the Crusades. Originally it was more people from France, Germany and Italy, but by the time we get to the 13th century, there's more evidence for the Scots and it could be that there were more of them going or that there's just more evidence for it, we're not entirely sure. It would have been the wealthier people in society that were fighting, it's quite an expensive thing to do. So we don't have any direct evidence that the Maxwells of Caerlaverock were involved in the Crusades, but it's not beyond the realms of possibility.

The other sort of theory about Venice, so at this time Venice was a really important trade link between the east and the west. So with the east you've got the Byzantine Empire and then you've kind of got Muslim-controlled territories beyond that. And Venice occupied the strategic point between these areas because of where it's located. So it had trade routes over land and by sea. We know that amongst the luxury goods that were coming in from the east were things like spices and silks and glass, like our Islamic glass. So it's possible that it was brought into the country that way.

Sarah:

That's amazing. And what would it have been a part of? So Islamic glass, am I right in thinking it was some sort of beaker?

Lynsey:

Yeah, so based on the sort of shape of it, we think it was a drinking vessel or beaker. There are other examples of similar glass existing in collections in whole pieces as opposed to fragments, that can be found in museum collections all over the world, again from about the 13th century and a lot of them again from Egypt and Syria, and they've also been identified as these drinking vessels. A lot of the surviving pieces from a similar sort of date and place are like ours in terms of they've got this like blue band that goes around it that's enamel. They've got Arabic inscriptions on them so the one that we've got has got part of the word eternal on it, and there's a theory that that might have been a part of the Quran, like a sort of Quran verse on there. And on ours we've also got some white and red decorative design and the XRF analysis also showed that there would have been gold gilding originally as well.

So yeah, other examples are very similar to that, but a lot of them have also got other designs such as like scrolling or geometric designs. Some of them have got fish on them as well, and apparently that was a symbol of like a good omen and sort of prosperity during this period. So yeah, there's lots of different options as to how our vessel could have looked, but unfortunately we'll just never know.

Sarah:

Sounds like it would have been quite a beautiful piece however it was, though right?

Lynsey:

Yeah absolutely. One of the most famous examples that still exists is like a whole vessel is in the V&A museum down in London. It's called the Luck of Edenhall so it's sort of beautifully decorated with reds and blues and little bits of greens and there's evidence for that being in Cumbria in the north of England in the 17th century. It's believed to have been made in Egypt or Syria around the 14th century, so it's a little bit later than our vessel. And it was included in the will of this guy called Sir Philip Musgrave, who was the owner of a house called Eden Hall, so that's where the name comes from.

And the word luck was used in the north of England at the time to describe objects that were sort of like exotic. So what we find with the Luck of Edenhall is that it was considered to be a really prestigious item and actually had its own sort of safety case made for it about a century after the glass itself, which still exists. So that's one of the reasons that it's probably

survived so well, and it's likely that the vessel that we had would have been as, you know, wealthy and cared for item as what the Luck of Edenhall was.

Sarah:

It's a very prestigious item that would have shown quite a lot of...

Lynsey:

Yeah, absolutely. And the fact that so many of these types of objects survive, it does suggest an element of commercialism, but it still would have been a luxury product. The majority of the population wouldn't have been able to afford these types of things.

Sarah:

And is it quite surprising that it's survived? I mean, it's very old, isn't it? Like from the 1200s, that's the sort of time period we're working with. So how did it manage to survive so well? I mean I would have thought that glass would, am I right in thinking, it would sort of degrade over time?

Lynsey:

There is some deterioration on the surface of it, particularly when you look at it under like a microscope. We also did digital documentation of it so kind of creating the 3D model and that really allows us to zoom in and see the details so we can see that there's damage to the enamel. A lot of the visible traces of the gold and the red have worn away, but yeah, you know it is incredible that it's still… you know the pieces we have are still in fairly good condition. Obviously, we are missing a huge quantity of it, and we just don't know where that is.

Sarah:

Could it still be there in the old castle?

Stefan:

There is a chance because the excavations weren't completely intrusive. There is still a layer of deposits. But because it was found in the floor layer, it's very unlikely that it would have gone underneath that floor level in some way. And I think that's one of the things which interests me as an archaeologist. How has that happened? How has three fragments of the vessel ended up in the floor of the hall because obviously, as we're saying, it's a, you know, incredible object. It would have been the owner's prized possession. So what's happened to it to end up being broken? Is it that someone has knocked it over and sort of gone, oh, we'd better hide this, hopefully they'll have forgotten about it? And, you know, some of the bits have just ended up in the floor. Kind of, you know, the floors back then would have been kind of beaten earth with hay and things on them and things like that. So nothing like it's not slipped through floorboards or anything like that. Or has it happened in a fight, an argument? Has someone broken it? Or is it just when they're abandoning and moving out of the castle and moving to the new one that it's got dropped and broken or something as well? Unfortunately, we don't know because we've never come across the rest of it. But it's quite interesting to think about that and why that's happened.

Lynsey:

One of the things we did as part of the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) project is we worked with an artist who created a digital reconstruction of what the whole vessel might have looked like.

Sarah:

And they can do that just from some fragments?

Lynsey:

Yeah, so from the fragments, we can sort of determine roughly what the size would have been. And then from historical research into other examples that survive in one piece, we're able to put together what we think ours could have looked like. So this is the artist's digital reconstruction.

Sarah:

Oh, that's beautiful. Oh, it's like a long with a wider top.

Lynsey:

Yes. Yeah. So it's sort of like a flute shape. So it expands at the top and it kind of goes upwards here at the base. And that helps with the stability. And you can see the outline here of… these are the fragments that we've got. And then based on that evidence and then other surviving examples, this is what we think the rest of the design would have looked like.

Sarah:

It is absolutely beautiful. That blue and gold band and then potentially this sort of fish inlay as well.

Lynsey:

Yeah, and the blue would have been so vivid, much more so than it is now. It really would have stood out.

Sarah:

You can see how prized a possession it would have been because even now it's absolutely stunning, isn't it?

Lynsey:

Yeah absolutely.

Sarah:

It's gorgeous and it also says a lot about the travel and international travel that was going on and the trade that was going on. I mean, when you talked about that harbour just being here, I mean it really brings the past to life and opens up different ideas.

Chapter 6

26:47

Lynsey:

I mean I think you know Scotland and Caerlaverock weren't as remote as we might initially think at this time. People would have been travelling for trade. There would have been pilgrims travelling, as well as people going to fight in the Crusades. There was a lot of movement of people from west to east and back again, and people were moving around, they were taking goods with them.

Stefan:

I think people in the past travelled a lot more than we really think about them these days. I think especially in the UK since we stopped using boats as much, people have forgotten actually how much travel there would have been. You know from here people could be sailing across to the Lake District across the Solway Firth. It's such a short journey versus going all the way around and things like that, so even just those small little connections, although I will have to correct on the record on one thing, which is only based on recent field work we've done, which is that the harbour is not a harbour, which spoils all of our stories. It means that the picture we have on site in front of us is actually out of date as well.

So, in 2021, we were doing a project called Weathering Extremes and we were looking at the reasons for why the old castle is abandoned in favour of the new castle and some of that work had been started in the 1990s with the excavations and they were looking at medieval storm events basically. And what has happened, very simply, is that various different storm events over the years, especially in the medieval period, actually silt up the coastline, which was only 100 metres or so from where we are, and it started to create these sort of mud flats, which go out further, so the coast moved further away. But also the storm events drove water in and not like sort of tidal waves crashing but like a tsunami so it would be like walls of water coming in and inundating the area. And whilst we don't think they ever actually impacted on the castle, we think it probably meant that the Maxwells went actually we're a bit too close to this so why don't we go a bit further inland where it's a bit higher and on a more stable kind of rocky base to build a different castle and keep ourselves safe.

And as part of that fieldwork we decided to investigate the harbour, but the base of the harbour would always have been above sea level, so you would not have been able to get boats in and out.

Sarah:

Oh right. So it wasn't a harbour.

Stefan:

So it wasn't a harbour. It's still a rectangular, quite a fairly big structure. We think it might have been a medieval fish pond but we can't prove that at the moment because there's no evidence which would sort of show us what that would have looked like.

Sarah:

Yeah, but what makes you think it might have been a medieval fish pond?

Stefan:

Firstly, they're very common in the medieval period and they're often associated with castles and you know elite, upper-class housing and things like that, and so just the size and the shape of it fits very well with being like a big pond for fishing, which would have obviously provided a source of food, maybe a bit of sport for them to go fishing as well, and things like that. So that's our best guess at the moment. One day we may come up with more evidence. We may find documentary records in an archive somewhere about that.

Sarah:

That is incredible. It just shows you, like you were saying earlier, about the new science coming in and the new ways of investigating things then throws up a whole different theory. And actually, so you have to sort of reinterpret I suppose what you've got here.

Stefan:

Absolutely yeah. So that is kind of cutting-edge research, the same as the Islamic glass which has been going on. And obviously given just the way as an organisation we are, we don't respond instantly and change all the on-site interpretations so that's sort of part of the programme which our Interpretation team will look at going forwards and how to do this and things like that, and hopefully, it'll be quite easy just to colour the boats out of the drawing.

Judith:

And I was just going to add on the back of what Stefan was saying about the coastline here. We all think it's quite quiet down here, that it's quite remote, but actually there would have been so many boats going backwards and forwards. The actual main route was on the sea, it wasn't on land, so there would have been a lot of movement backwards and forwards out there. So yeah, because you think we've only got the A75, that's just the main route down, but there would have been so many people going backwards and forwards and using that. So much easier to get across on the sea than it would have been on land.

Chapter 7

30:52

Sarah:

The discovery of this glass is phenomenal, but it's not the only item of importance that's been found here. Remember me saying that the castle and its story is intimately woven with the landscape? Well, it's the same landscape that we have to thank for a lot of these discoveries, including some at the new castle.

So we've walked a very lovely walk through the woodlands there back from the old castle back to where we started in the new castle and to get in here we obviously walked over that little bridge that would have been a drawbridge back in the day, which I love. And we also saw the moat there as well, so can you tell us a little bit about the water and the moat and even the conditions around here being so boggy and marshy, like how that's helped the preservation of artefacts.

Stefan:

So much like the old castle, obviously, as you say, this has got a moat around it again, which would have been partly defensive. Obviously, a lot of castles have moats around them. Some of them are dry. Caerlaverock, it's only, I think, one of two in Scotland, which are still wet moats as well. The other one's Rothesay Castle in Bute. And what is amazing about Caerlaverock is that in the 1960s, the moat was actually cleared. So it wasn't particularly wet at that point, but our labourers actually excavated all the silt in the moat to get it back down to its original level so it could be refilled. And in doing so, they recovered hundreds of different artefacts from the castle.

Sarah:

Wow. What sort of thing did they recover?

Stefan:

So it was a huge range of artefacts, a lot of organic material. So things like wood, leather, things we wouldn't expect to survive normally in medieval castles, but it's because they ended up in the moat, which is why they survived. So in the waterlogged conditions, there's a lack of oxygen, which allows for organic material to get preserved. There's not the bacteria or the other insects, which would start to eat textiles or eat away at leather and wood and things like that. So they actually survive in these conditions, waiting for archaeologists to come along and find them.

Sarah:

And you did.

Stefan:

We did. Not personally, no. I'm not that old.

Judith:

Sadly not.

Sarah:

And then can I just ask about that pipeline? So when you found like a piece of leather or an archaeologist does, what happens to it then?

Stefan:

We panic and phone Judith.

Sarah:

What do you say?

Judith:

And Judith tries not to panic as well. So what normally happens these days is somebody like Stefan might give me a call and say we have found such and such item. It depends on the object where it's been found. It depends how fragile it is. It depends on what condition it's in. So often what will happen is if it's not a simple case of where we would go and pick it up, we will very often bring along specialists. So that could be archaeologists who would come and retrieve the item, but also would know how to handle it properly and especially things like wood items. So we had a piece of the drawbridge found not long ago in the moat. It was when we had a very dry spell. So the water had gone right down and this piece of wood was found. Which was really exciting.

But the problem is when wood has been waterlogged for a very long time, you can't just take it out and dry it out immediately because then it deteriorates very, very quickly. So that was a case of us having to then phone specialist contractors to come in to remove it, to get it into conditions where we could very, very slowly dry it out.

So it usually goes into, Stefan, correct me if I'm wrong, but usually sort of vats of water first and then we'll go through a process of drying it out. So it's still actually with the specialist contractors at the moment. It's a long, long process, but it does mean that we can rescue these objects and minimise the damage to them.

Sarah:

Yeah, must be very satisfying.

Judith:

It is. It's wonderful. So we've got beautiful pieces of leather which are decorated, which would have been high status objects. We have wooden combs that have been found. It's not on display here, sadly, but we do have a comb that has like initials and it's probably a love token. But it's less romantic when you realise that one side has a normal comb and the other side has very, very, very small teeth, which was probably used for removing lice.

Sarah:

Oh, right.

Judith:

So not quite as romantic as it sounds. But we've got woodworking material. So we've got picks and axes and we've got knives. We've got so many pieces of shoes as well. So there's huge amounts that have come out of the moat, which are actually very exciting because it gives us a much broader picture of what life was like here than we probably have at a lot of our other sites. But what is interesting, and what is missing from the record, is actually animal bone. So we don't actually have much in the way of evidence of what they may have been eating here, which is quite interesting because that's normally something...

Stefan:

They've found.

Judith:

Normally it's found. So that's something that's missing. But on the other hand, we've got all these other things that you don't normally find. And some of them are beautifully decorated as well. So again, it gives that impression of trade and of high status and the fact that, yes, we might be in a lovely quiet corner of Dumfries and Galloway. But yeah, it really gives you a

sense of the activities that were probably happening around here. And we've got the beautiful landscape as well. So we can see what activities might have been happening, the fish pond. We've got probably what could have been deer enclosures as well.

You can see this beautiful woodland around here. So there would have been ample sources of wood. So you can start to get an idea of what it would have been like. It's not just a quiet little corner of the countryside. There would have been lots of different activities going on and lots of different people with skills coming probably from all over the place to come and work here. So, yeah, at various points, especially when they were building things like the Nithsdale Lodgings, it probably was very, very busy. Lots of different people here doing lots of different jobs. So it's quite exciting to be able to think back to what it was probably like at the time and to think of how important the activities here would have been.

Lynsey:

And yeah, there would have been periods where it was effectively a building site, because there were so many sort of phases of redevelopment. And, you know, in cases of after some of the sieges, rebuilding, you know, there would have been scaffolding, there would have been stonemasons working on the site so it's not just a residential area, it's very much like a working area as well.

Chapter 8

37:31

Sarah:

It's so fascinating to me to think about how these tiny fragments of the past can challenge everything we know about ourselves. That tiny piece of glass tells a story of travel, of trade and connection, of people who lived here centuries ago, yet were far from isolated. Part of a world that stretched far beyond these castle walls, reaching across seas, cultures and continents.

At Caerlaverock, the landscape holds on to these stories, and perhaps that's the real magic of a place like this – not just what we can see, but what we're still discovering.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

It was produced and edited by Adam Stoner and I’m Sarah MacGillivray.

Next time, we travel to the Isle of Lewis to explore what everyday life was really like in Scotland’s not so distant past. From the peat fires and thatched roofs, to the rhythms of a community built around the land and the sea. See you then.