Historic Scotland podcast:
Series 2, Episode 2 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah's intro:

Hello, and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name is 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 live, work and take care of it, and unearth its beautiful, haunting and surprising story.

Today, we're off to Holyrood Park, a beloved Edinburgh landmark. We're exploring the park's many layers of history and uncovering stories of artefacts that lie hidden beneath the surface.

We're chatting to the University of Edinburgh's Professor John Henderson about archaeological treasures.

Chapter 2

0:45

John:

We're actually standing on the line of the rampart here. It would have been in the prehistoric period, probably more like just a big built-up earthen mound.

Quite impressive architecture for the time, it's about 2,500 years old.

Sarah:

We'll be talking to Rachel Pickering, who tries to preserve the archaeology here for future generations.

Rachel:

We get the impression from the archaeological evidence that there was a big push for building agricultural surplus and managing that and controlling that in the Iron Age.

Sarah:

Later, we meet up with Park Ranger Martin Gray to dive deeper into how he and his team take care of all that Holyrood Park has to offer, both past and present.

Martin:

We've put quite a lot of effort in with the emergency services to do a lot of university and school education classes around the impact of fire, around the impact of fireworks, both from a safety point of view, but then the aftermath that's left behind.

Sarah:

Together, we'll hear how a place that attracts countless tourists each year is also a gateway to the ancient world.

I'm very excited.

Let's go.

Chapter 3

1:53

Sarah:

So much of Holyrood Park is accidental. Famous for Arthur's Seat, this site was forged by volcanoes more than 300 million years ago, long before the idea of Scotland or the cities surrounding it even existed. Every generation has written something onto this space. Mesolithic hunters passed through. People of the Bronze Age buried their dead here.

Iron Age communities watched the land and the sea. Medieval pilgrims walked paths towards the abbey. Kings hunted here. Armies marched past.

And here’s a number that blew my mind: 111.

That’s how many archaeological sites there are here in Holyrood Park.

John:

You’ve got the full human experience of the landscape here, right in the middle of the city, which is quite exciting.

Sarah:

That’s the voice of Professor John Henderson.

Now, we use the term rampart here. All you need to know going into this is that a rampart is a defensive bank. It’s an earthwork, sometimes faced with stone and often with a ditch.

John:

So we’re standing on the top of Dunsapie Crag, which is actually Dunsapie Hill Fort.

We know, because we’ve excavated here for a couple of seasons, now, that we’ve got a rampart that runs around the whole of the hill here. We’ve got a second one that’s just running down the side of the hill. So it’s got two ramparts, two areas enclosing this open area that you can see we’re standing on now, which has amazing views around Edinburgh. But on this area, this is where people would have been living, and we’ve got evidence of roundhouses. Just on that edge there, just in front of us you can see this, it looks just kind of flat but that’s actually another rampart in front of us.

Chapter 4

3:40

Sarah:

John’s been working in and around Holyrood Park for many years now.

He’s got an amazing rock and roll background – a professor of coastal and marine archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, he was fresh from a research trip in Italy when he spoke to us.

John:

I also work on land sites and terrestrial sites as well. And this is kind of how this project came about.

Holyrood Archaeology Project has a couple of linked aims. One is about finding out about the archaeology of Holyrood Park, which not a lot of people know about and know about these amazing range of sites that we have here.

And the other part of it is about training the next generation of archaeologists. So, it's about training the undergraduates that come on the field school that we run here every year. We've been running it for five years, since about 2021.

We do a three-week field school where we bring about 40 to 50 students from the University of Edinburgh. And they work directly with AOC Archaeology, which are one of the commercial units, one of the biggest in the country. But they have their main offices in Loanhead, near here.

And what that means is they work alongside commercial archaeologists. So we have our students being trained by people who are actually working in the profession. So it's making that link between academia and commercial archaeology. And hopefully students are then learning the skills that will be useful for them if they want to get a job in archaeology afterwards.

And it kind of came about through discussions with Historic Environment Scotland and they helped fund this project and Historic Environment Scotland… obviously Holyrood Park is a scheduled national monument, so they have the responsibility for looking after it and managing it, and one of the things we have… we have this huge archaeological resource, but we don't really know very much about it. Prior to our work, not a single site in the park had had any radiocarbon dating or been dated, and there hadn't been any excavation of any level in the park.

So we're the first project to start looking at the archaeology, amazingly, given that we're right in the middle of Edinburgh, because Historic Environment Scotland have this responsibility to look after it and protect it, but also because it's such an important part of Edinburgh.

Thousands and thousands of visitors come here every day, millions over the year, and that's great. They're using the park, they're seeing the natural geology, and that's why it's famous, and all the rest of it, but those visitors numbers are putting pressure on the sites in the park. So if you get thousands of people tramping up and down the hill, they're walking over the old

ramparts, they're walking over a number of the old sites and they're actually destroying the archaeology, they're eroding the archaeology as they're doing it. So part of what we are doing is trying to assess the level of that impact and excavate parts that are under threat, but also find out new parts of the site, new sites, new areas that need to be protected so that will inform Historic Environment Scotland's management plan.

Chapter 5

6:39

Sarah:

I'm from Edinburgh but I never thought of Holyrood Park as an archaeological site, but I had no idea that so much wealth of archaeology…

John:

This is what makes it so unique because we're in the middle of the city and everyone knows it as a, you know, a beautiful geological and natural place to come, but it's also an archaeological landscape. And the interesting thing is, it survived because it was made into a royal hunting park. From about the 12th century onwards, from David I, and then it was walled off in 1541 by James V and from that point on there hasn't really been building activity and development, so the city's developed around it and it's kind of left this area as an untouched, to some extent, archaeological landscape.

And we've got four hill forts. We've got Bronze Age hut platforms. We've got lots and lots of field systems. We can see some field systems from where we're standing at the moment.

We've got a prehistoric landscape, which is quite exciting. And then we've got some early medieval material. We've got the St Anthony's Chapel from the 15th century, 14th-15th century. So we've got, you know, all of this material and yet people don't know about it.

Sarah:

No, there's so much, so rich…

John:

Yes, it's very rich and in some ways it tells the story of Edinburgh before Edinburgh was Edinburgh, which I think is quite nice. So, you know, if you've got Edinburgh being founded as a borough in 1125 by David I, you've got the market, you've got the castle and so on. That's when Edinburgh as a city started as we know it, but prior to that obviously there was human occupation, there was settlements, there was things going on. We know, for example, in Castle Rock, where the castle is, there's late Bronze Age evidence of occupation there, so that could have been a hill fort in the late Bronze Age/Iron Age.

We know where we're standing now was a hill fort; we got radiocarbon dates from here from about 500BC. We're facing Arthur's Seat, which is another hill fort. Just beyond that there's Samson's Rib, which is also in the park, which is a hill fort. And then over in Salisbury Crags we've got a hill fort, so this area, in the Iron Age, about 2,000 years ago, would have been heavily settled.

Sarah:

Wow, so you would have been able… you'd be in your hill fort and you would look over at Arthur's Seat, for example, and you'd see another hill fort?

John:

I think that's what's really interesting about it, we don't know about the contemporaneity between them all, but some of them will have been contemporary, there's no doubt about that I think, and it's one of the things about what people did 2,000 years ago was this idea of living up in tops of hills, which is maybe not the most natural thing that you think you'd want to do.

But part of that was obviously defence, security.

Sarah:

So you could see people coming.

John:

You could see people coming. You could also communicate with other people.

So, actually, where we're standing now, it's a bit misty today… In fact, we might not be able to see it.

Normally, if we looked at that direction, we'd see a sort of lozenge-shaped hill, which is Traprain Law, which is another massive Iron Age hill fort and probably the most important one in the region. And it's visible from here.

And just beyond, I don't know if you can see it… you can just kind of see a kind of, just in the mist there, it almost looks like a pyramid or something.

Sarah:

Looking out to East Lothian. Yeah, yes, I can see it. In the mist…

John:

So just there, that's Berwick Law, which is another Iron Age hill fort.

So you can see how they're all kind of intervisible. They could send messages to each other, be part of some sort of trading network. Whether they're all friends or whether they're competing with each other, we don't really know.

Sarah:

But they could have been aware of each other and see each other potentially.

John:

So you really get an idea of a different way of life, don't you? So living up a hill, see what people are going, seeing they're approaching you. And I think for me that's quite exciting, to think about what was happening in Edinburgh 2,000 years ago.

Chapter 6

10:27

Sarah:

So can you talk us through what would happen… So when your students and you are deciding where to put the trench, how big is the trench? I mean what tools and how are you sort of mapping that?

John:

Okay, so we have a very detailed survey of the whole of the park, from LiDAR survey, which gives us a sort of 3D impression of the whole park to quite a good level of detail. And from that, we can begin to identify the areas where there are paths.

We just had a couple of people walk past with their dogs there, and you can see that they're beginning to eke out paths in the landscape and people tend to follow the same paths.

And this is part of the issue that we have, is doing that over time, you can see just there where that path is. They've come down onto the bedrock. So they've eroded it down to the bedrock. So anything that was there will have now gone.

So what we do in terms of positioning our trenches is we're trying to, at one point, look at the areas where there's been a lot of erosion. But also to compare that, look at areas, you know, just over there where there's less erosion and see a comparison between the two of what the level of deposit we're losing.

One thing that's quite interesting, we just see here, you can actually see, I don't know if you can see this, but we actually had a trench in here. Do you see where the turf is slightly yellower? It's come and come back. It will go green, don't worry.

Sarah:

Okay.

John:

But see this area here. It's so small. It's only like two metres by about a metre.

But this is actually part of the wall of a roundhouse. Here, these stones here.

This is the rampart running in here. And then you've got this. Now, it's surprising because there's probably only about, I don't know, 30 centimetres of deposit here.

And this is the kind of stuff that's being eroded away. So this originally would have been a building. You can see it's all eroded away here.

Sarah:

Yeah.

John:

In that 30 centimetres of deposit, when we excavated, we actually found three parts of really quite large bits of Iron Age pottery.

Sarah:

No way.

John:

Surviving. So even in small areas like this, you have these little… I call them pockets of resistance.

Sarah:

Love it.

John:

But they're just kind of surviving, in amongst this stuff.

Sarah:

And that's amazing. So it must be like, there must be so much.

John:

Yeah, and I think that surprises people because you kind of look at it and you think, well, there's probably not a lot here, is there?

But, actually, you can be lucky and hit things and come alongside quite important prehistoric finds.

Sarah:

And how do you do that? So you know when you set your trench up, and it would be quite small, would it be quite a small...?

John:

The whole of the park is a scheduled national monument, so we have to apply in advance for permission for all of our trenches. But within that, we'll put a bit of a buffer zone if we need to extend, if we find something really important. But, generally, they're evaluation trenches so they tend to only be two by one metre, three by four metres, five by seven… we're not doing massive area excavation because we're targeting areas to see the level of erosion and to see what's the impact on the archaeology.

Sarah:

And would you then, would it be like certain tools you're using to then go through the ground?

John:

Yeah, I mean, archaeology is, you know, we like to use lots and lots of scientific techniques for radiocarbon dating and for working out what the environment was like. But the day-to-day actual work is using shovels and trowels.

Sarah:

Right, okay. So getting down and dirty.

John:

Yeah, exactly.

So generally in an area like this, first thing you'll do is remove the turf.

You'll do that in an organised way, cutting it into nice little square sections, piling it by the side of the trench so you can put it back as it was, and then using trowels. Because we've got such a shallow deposit here, we'd be straight down into slowly removing the deposit with trowels and seeing what we uncover.

Sarah:

And what is it like when you find something and how do you know if it's a good something to find or if it's just a bit, you know, not particularly…?

John:

I break lots of students hearts every day when they bring me bits of stone and I say 'that's a stone' and it really, it's about getting your eye into what you're looking at and it's just a bit of experience and within, you know, by the end of the couple of weeks students as well will be identifying what's pottery and what's a stone, and so on.

So what you're doing is, if you're coming across something, particularly here, it's a bit of an event having a find, particularly in an Iron Age site, because Iron Age sites 2,000 years ago, a lot of the stuff they would be using would be organic, it would be wooden and a lot of it's gone. And, although they used pottery, pottery in this part of Scotland is actually not that common to find. We've actually found quite a lot here, so we've been quite lucky with that.

So any find is an event.

Sarah:

Yes. You gather around. In my head, you go like…

John:

There can be that, yes, depending on what it is. Certainly, when we found the copper bangle there was a bit of that.

Sarah:

Yeah, that's exciting.

John:

And what you do if it's something really exciting, obviously the first thing you do is kind of stop. You see what you're doing, look around it, begin to clear around the site, maybe go to more fine tools. You can use dental implements, but it depends what it is. If it's something really important, you record it where it is, in situ, so you'll do maybe a 3D model using photogrammetry, so using cameras.

You'll record the position, you'll maybe plan it and then you have to think about getting it out of there. And if it's something fragile, you know, if it's a bit of pottery, you just simply lift it and put it into a finds bag, or a stone implement similarly. But, if it's something a bit more fragile – maybe a bone that's friable, or something like that – or something that's organic, a bit of wood, something like this, what you tend to do is just take the whole chunk of earth around it out as a slab and then take it back to the lab and excavate it there.

But we haven't had anything of that importance. Everything has been 'I need to remove it back to the lab'. We have had some important finds, but there will be ones we can excavate around and lift.

Sarah:

What would you say to someone who's thinking of a career in archaeology?

John:

It's one of the things I get asked a lot. You know, should I do archaeology? If you want to do archaeology, you should absolutely do it. You can get a job in it. There's a bit of a perception

problem with archaeology. I think a lot of people tend to think of people in jumpers… I think *Time Team* had something to do with this… jumpers and beards and sitting around and, not that they sit around, but you know people send pipes and libraries looking at… and that's not what it's about. It's a vibrant and dynamic subject, which is part of the planning process, it's part of managing the landscape and there's a real demand for it.

So yeah, I would say definitely do archaeology.

And it's been brilliant to me. I mean, I've got to travel the world and find lots of sites and just have a great time.

Sarah:

That was a lovely answer.

I want to ask you about Indiana Jones, but I'm not sure I should.

John:

You can, that's why I got into it.

Sarah:

Is it why you got into it?

John:

I'm of that generation.

Sarah:

I'm of that generation so was wondering.

John:

I even wrote to Harrison Ford telling him I wanted to be an archaeologist.

Sarah:

And did he write back to you?

John:

I've got a signed photo from him.

Sarah:

No way? He got back to you?

John:

Do you know…

Sarah:

Or his team did.

John:

I think his team did because I've looked at that photo in years to come and it looks not like his signature. I wonder if somebody in an office went, 'oh, poor kid'.

And it might be, but it is…

Sarah:

Or maybe it's real, but it was in a rush.

John:

Well, no, I mean, it could be real. I don't know.

It's a real *Raiders of the Lost Ark* publicity still, though.

Sarah:

Really? Is that what actually… did Indiana Jones genuinely fire your interest in becoming an archaeologist?

John:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I remember, part of, you know, I was about seven, eight years old. And again, it opened up this whole new world, which seems like fantasy, but then when you look into it, you realise it's real, that you can go and find these things, maybe not in the way that Indiana Jones did.

Sarah:

You've got a whip and a hat.

John:

Well, that's the problem.

I mean, I've loved my career in archaeology, but I have a bit of an issue with Indiana Jones in that I've never got to ride a horse, use a whip. It's just not happened.

So it's been more, you know, excavation, recording. He doesn't tend to do a lot of that in these movies.

Sarah:

No, he doesn't.

John:

But it has, you know, it's inspirational. And the idea of finding lost cultures and lost civilisations is part of what drives you in archaeology.

Chapter 7

18:17

Sarah:

There was a phrase that John used as I spoke to him, which was ‘tripping over history’.

The idea that these ramparts are everywhere, not just in Holyrood, but across Scotland, that really stuck with me.

Adam:

Hey, sorry for the interruption. My name’s Adam.

I’m the producer of the Historic Scotland podcast.

And if you’re enjoying it, there’s loads 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 version that you’re currently listening to, the public cut.

Membership also gives you free entry to Historic Scotland sites across the country, free entry to daytime events, and help support the care and preservation of the places that we explore in episodes like this.

If you’d like to hear more, and help keep Scotland’s stories alive, become a Historic Scotland member today.

Just follow the link in the episode notes for more information.

Chapter 8

19:16

Sarah:

It was getting a bit chilly atop Dunsapie Crag, so we descended back towards the loch, falling back into the shadow of Arthur’s Seat, which is where we bumped into…

Rachel:

I’m Rachel Pickering. I’m Senior Cultural Resources Advisor for the Edinburgh region. So I’m an archaeologist by background and I look after the properties and care of Historic Environment Scotland that are in the Edinburgh region. That involves providing archaeological and historical advice and ensuring that we kind of maintain and understand the cultural significance of those properties.

So right now we’re stood sort of almost at the summit of Crow Hill and Arthur’s Seat in Holyrood Park and looking out over Dunsapie Crag and the loch down below.

And we’re kind of nestled in amongst several of the hill forts, the Iron Age hill forts within Holyrood Park.

So we have the one that we can see the ramparts across there enclosing the back of Crow Hill and Arthur’s Seat just in front of us.

And looking down below, you can see the multiple lines of ramparts enclosing the summit of Dunsapie Crag as well. And just some glimpses of the kind of quite ephemeral archaeological remains in the park.

Sarah:

What are the sort of main challenges? Because it seems like it must be quite an unusual site to manage in that sense that it is a public park.

Rachel:

It is.

Sarah:

And it’s had relatively little, previous to this excavation work, done on it. So what are the sort of main challenges with managing somewhere like this?

Rachel:

I think the biggest challenge is that it’s a huge green landscape in the heart of a capital city, one that is a major tourist destination.

We’ve seen visitor numbers skyrocket in the park over the last decade. We probably get millions of visitors a year, but we are actually only beginning to start trying to understand the visitor numbers and how many users we have in the park. So there’s a huge visitor pressure.

And it’s seen as a recreational park for locals and a kind of tick-box exercise for tourists wanting to bag the summit of Arthur’s Seat.

And the kind of archaeological importance is often overlooked, but it is one of the richest and best-preserved prehistoric landscapes in southern Scotland. And that’s so hard for people to grasp when you’ve just got really low lumps and bumps covered in grass that probably don’t mean a lot to most people in the park.

But yeah, they’re hugely nationally important remains. So, trying to share that message to the public, to the visitors that are only here potentially for an hour, is the real challenge.

And also, so much of what makes the park important is it just being a green space that’s free and really accessible. So you don’t want to take that access away.

It’s a real juggling act to encourage people to explore this green space and to have that amenity, whilst also making sure that in using the park they’re not gradually wearing away these archaeological remains.

Sarah:

Yeah, so big question. How do you do that?

Rachel:

So over the last few years a good team of us have been working together on the Landscape Conservation Management Plan for the park. That was launched in autumn 2024.

And that looks at all the different aspects that go into managing a complex landscape like this, from hydrology to the natural heritage and the archaeological remains and the visitor amenities.

And so that sets out our objectives and making sure that if we’ve got tree planting going in, for example, to kind of help us with climate change targets and biodiversity aims, that it’s not

going in in archaeologically sensitive areas, that we've mapped those areas out and that everything is kind of like working in support of each other.

Often the natural and the archaeological things go quite hand in hand. For example, they're really wanting to work on reducing the gorse cover in the park because the gorse is not great for biodiversity, but also the roots can be really damaging for archaeological remains.

So it's quite easy to join forces for those side of things.

And for the more challenging aspects like visitor erosion, which is one of the biggest challenges in the park, we are really trying to focus our efforts on maintaining a core network of paths.

We're lucky that, apart from this path that comes up the back of Arthur's Seat, most of the main path networks aren't impacting valuable archaeological remains.

The main one up to the summit, for example, there's a lot of erosion there, but for the most part, it's not interacting with known archaeological remains.

This one up the back from Dunsapie is more of a challenge because it crosses through these prehistoric and later cultivation terraces. And actually, when you're walking up you might see signs of like netting under the grass, which is from previous efforts a generation ago to kind of reduce soil erosion and kind of knit the soil back together and put more turf down on top, so this has been a challenge for a long time, but it's been exacerbated in recent years because of climate change and even more visitor numbers than ever.

So yeah, trying to focus on maintaining the core path networks over the next few years, the main approach to the summit is going to be our priority to really improve that path.

We've recently, this year, completed the zigzag path in terms of major repairs to stabilise that.

And we're hoping that through signage, the message that the rangers put out, through kind of careful stewardship that we can kind of gently guide people onto these paths, where we know they're going to have less of an impact than letting them wander off and cause like new kind of desire lines in the landscape where they might be impacting upon archaeological remains.

Sarah:

That's interesting. I never thought in terms of like sticking to paths is actually protecting ancient landscape.

Rachel:

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Chapter 9

25:53

Sarah:

So, we're just going to head up to where lots of people are standing.

Rachel:

Yes.

Sarah:

To get a good view. I mean, for views of the city, I don't think, I think this is the best place, isn't it?

Rachel:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's a natural point to pause and catch your breath after the hike up so far as well.

Sarah:

As Rachel and I, surrounded by a small gaggle of tourists, started wandering further up the hill, I asked her what happens to the work that John and his field school students unearth.

Rachel:

We have the results of five seasons of fieldwork now. So five different years, about at least a dozen trenches have been opened.

And once they've been backfilled and the archaeologists have left the site, we then have a couple of hundred small finds. So things from like bits of charcoal, we have animal bones, some worked bone, stone tools, bits of pottery.

And we also have hundreds of soil samples from different contexts. So, like from the floor of like the roundhouse or from the underneath of one of the ramparts. So, we have loads of soil samples like that as well.

And the next steps are really working out what our priorities are in terms of analysis.

So, we'll have specialists that sort out and record all of the small finds that look at signs of wear, that identify samples of charcoal and animal bone that might be good for radiocarbon dating. So then we can start to build in chronologies of the sites and understand what was built when and how long it was used for.

And then the soil sampling – we will have kind of specialists looking at pollen remains and chemical traces within the soil. So they can give us a bit of an idea about the environment at the time, what people were potentially growing in the landscape.

And, again, they might build up a picture of how long the site was used for and how intensively it was used for from those environmental remains.

Sarah:

What's your favourite find that you've found out that's come back to you through information? Is there a part of the park or a piece of information that most surprised you, is your favourite or anything?

Rachel:

I think one of the most exciting discoveries since I've been working in Holyrood Park is the excavations in 2024, which revealed the remains of a stone-built roundhouse on the back of Crow Hill.

That's just a really tantalising glimpse of a prehistoric settlement that we didn't even know was there before and it just really shows how we're almost rewriting the history of Holyrood

Park continually. There's so much still to discover and that was a really important reminder of that.

And a few years prior to us starting the field school we had some excavations into the cultivation terraces on the back of Crow Hill and environmental cores in Dunsapie Loch that really helped to confirm for us the long history of human use of this landscape, stretching back to the Mesolithic, and that there was really intense agriculture here from the Bronze Age onwards. And it was amazing to actually get some hard data that started to confirm those suspicions that this is a landscape that's been shaped for thousands of years by humans.

Chapter 10

29:30

Sarah:

Now the very spot Rachel and I stood made international headlines in the summer.

A wildfire spread across this whole area. It smouldered for weeks on end and could be seen from miles away.

Everyone was worried about it.

The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service said that they couldn't find an exact cause of the fire, but fire chiefs believe the blaze was due to human activity, exacerbated by the warm and dry climate we experienced in 2025. The Met Office has just called it the warmest summer on record.

Rachel:

I was down the south of England and saw it on the front page of a newspaper. And I was like, what? Like, I need to find out what's going on. Checked my emails. And I was like, 'oh my gosh, this is not good'.

Sarah:

Rachel is one of the individuals whose job it was to piece together the aftermath of the fire.

Nobody was hurt in the blaze, but the same cannot be said for the archaeology here at Holyrood Park.

Rachel:

The first step was to understand where the fire was, how it was spreading, and whether it was in areas that are of high archaeological sensitivity, which unfortunately a big part of it was.

You can see here on the back of Crow Hill, a good part of it was affecting the cultivation terraces, which have evidence of kind of human activity from the Bronze Age onwards.

One of the things we're focusing on in the aftermath is getting our archaeologists, archaeological contractors out on site to undertake a condition survey.

So they'll be walking over the fire-affected area to kind of look at where there are archaeological remains that we know about and what condition they're in and whether they're in a vulnerable state and need some kind of follow-up conservation work or whether they need kind of any rescue archaeology, like recording if they're at risk of loss.

So we're planning for that survey to be undertaken in December of this year.

And then they will also be looking to identify any archaeological remains that might have come to light as a result of the fire.

We actually had a feature that the rangers flagged when they were doing a walkover once the fire was out, like back at the end of August. They notified me about a really unusual assemblage of animal bones near to the summit of Crow Hill, right within the fire-affected area, that was just sort of sat on the surface, partially buried by some of the ashy deposits from the fire. But it was a really unusual mix of lots of different species. Some of them had evidence for butchery marks, there were some traces of paint on the bones, and we have no idea what date they are.

It had been covered by dense gorse, so nobody had noticed them previously. And there's also some slight traces that there might be some kind of stone-built structure in the vicinity of where the bones were found too.

So we got our archaeological contractors on site to record that and to remove those remains because now they're exposed, they're vulnerable to being washed away or blown away or people disturbing them without understanding that they could be archaeological. So we've removed those and now we're planning to undertake quite detailed assessment of them to identify the species and to get radiocarbon dates and to really kind of figure out the

significance of that deposit and whether it’s linked to any other kind of wider feature that might tell us a bit more about how those remains came to be there.

And it’s possible that the walkover survey might identify more finds or features that we previously didn’t know about as well.

Sarah:

Did you work really closely with the rangers then?

Rachel:

Yes, yeah.

The rangers are really good at flagging if they find things, if visitors find things that might be potentially of archaeological significance.

We sometimes have issues with illegal metal detecting or ground disturbance. And the rangers are like the people on the ground. They’re the ones seeing all this stuff.

And they have really good relationships with the local community. So they’re great at having that conversation with me. And yeah, kind of two-way conversation to make sure that we’re on top of those things and managing everything.

Sarah:

Well, I think it’s time to go meet a ranger then.

Chapter 11

34:09

Martin:

My name is Martin Gray. I’m the Ranger and Visitor Services Manager for Historic Environment Scotland.

So I manage our ranger services across the estate and also help with our nature conservation advice across the estate.

So that means I have a team at Holyrood Park and a team at Linlithgow and a team in Orkney, conveniently.

Sarah:

Here, Linlithgow, Orkney… that's quite far away.

Martin:

Yep, that's how it goes.

Sarah:

And what do you do? What do the rangers do?

Martin:

So our rangers are generally here to assist, educate, inform and encourage positive engagement of the landscape, and the sites that we work on.

And so they've got a broad-ranging remit, from learning and inclusion, interpretation, leading guided walks, nature conservation work through surveying and practical activities, all the way through to, in Holyrood's case, you know, helping manage incidents and other things that occur on the site throughout the year.

Sarah:

We were discussing earlier a little bit about gorse. So is gorse something that you deal with quite a lot?

Martin:

Yeah, so the park has quite… Holyrood Park has quite a considerable amount of gorse on it. It's increased quite significantly in sort of the last 20 odd years. We can demonstrate almost 130% increase across that period of time.

And that’s primarily through changes in how the site has managed or how the site is used. By that, I mean it used to be used for grazing and now that’s kind of come off there. So obviously the gorse has an opportunity to get in.

We’re using much more mechanical cutting, which obviously machines can’t reach the same areas that sheep and other animals could.

And so, yeah, it spreads quite rapidly. And we’ve had to take, we’re starting to take some more positive action on it. What we’re looking at just now, you can see that, you know, you can see fire breaks being cut through centres of gorse.

It’s not going to prevent the fire. It’s just the idea is it slows the spread. And it also gives a defensive area for the fire brigade to work with so that we can protect the monument wherever possible.

Sarah:

With regard to the fire this summer, obviously that sort of...

Martin:

Yeah, so it covered about 30 hectares of the park. So about 20 odd football pitches, if you want to put it into context.

Some of it was sheer rock face, so it wasn’t that accessible as an area of the park. But it’s had an impact obviously, both from the point of view of air within the city in the immediate, but then long-term kind of impact on the landscape. We’ll get quite a bit of regrowth when it occurs, which will be quite interesting to see because obviously the gorse inhibits other plants from growing, so sort of next year, maybe the year after, you’ll get quite a lot of different flora and fauna appearing, especially flora from underneath where the gorse was because there’ll be quite a lot still in the seed bank. So we should get quite a plethora of colour. Usually things like rosebay willowherb and foxgloves and things like that will start appearing because they’re quite good at lasting and outlasting others.

Willowherb has the nickname of fireweed because it’s known to come in immediately after a fire and take over. And that’ll progress. Eventually in a few years’ time you would probably end up back with gorse, but the immediate impact has obviously been it’s destabilised the soil in that area, it’s destabilised the rock to a certain extent, a lower extent thankfully. And it’s obviously displaced some wildlife. We were fortunate that from a rare plant point of view,

because we'd done the fire break cutting on the other side of the hill, we'd managed to preserve two rare species that are in decline across the country, but we'd managed to stop them from becoming into the fire patch and, at the time, the way the fire was spreading, we were fortunate the fire brigade were then able to defend that line for that period of time. Obviously when it gets dark and there's other issues, wind etc, that might not have been possible, but in this situation, it was, so that was a good save, and those fire breaks assisted them in accessing those areas to defend that line basically.

Sarah:

So what are, for you, the biggest challenges of managing a place like this, from a ranger's perspective?

Martin:

I think it's a balancing act, it's always going to be a balancing act. I think we've termed it in the strategy as just it's a conflicted space.

Sarah:

Okay.

Martin:

And that's not meant to be in a negative way. It comes from all angles. It's a scheduled monument. So we have lots of archaeology that a lot of people aren't actually aware of.

Most people, if you look through the feedback that we got, it's a green space. And as far as they're concerned, it's a park. And they want to use it as a park.

Not quite understanding. And that's where the ranger team are coming in and other methods come in to try and explain to people that, actually, the only reason it is a green space and the only reason it is protected is because of the archaeology underneath it and the boundary wall, etc, that they can see.

So, yeah, so I suppose you've got the scheduled monument. You've got a number of nature conservation designations and reports. You've got a desire from public use for all sorts. I

mean, you know, the uses are so wide-ranging from, you know, what people would class as normal activities to, you know, roller skiing down the middle of the road when it's closed on a weekend or walking your raccoon on a Sunday. Because there are people who do that.

Llamas, we've got pictures of llamas being walked through the middle of the park. Whatever you can imagine, it's probably happened here at some point during the day.

It's a fully accessible site, so that's seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

It's not like some of our other properties where we can lock it. There's an eight-kilometre boundary wall, so we cover basically over 260 hectares in the centre of a city.

We have a porous access point, multiple avenues that you can enter the park from anywhere.

We actually don't have the figure for how many people use it and that's one of the things we're working on at the moment, but the estimates range between two to five million users across a year.

If I give you one example, this path… the volunteers walk in here and the Radical Road when it was open in about early 2018, we had a survey going on on those, with survey cameras, which were counting. So in a two-week period in September, which wasn't the busiest point in the year, we had 10,000 people using each of those paths over a two-week period.

Sarah:

Wow!

Martin:

So, just as a small example, on one path as to how much in a small period of time people are in and using it and frequently.

We can, you know, loads of the team have been here for quite a considerable amount of time, 20 years or odd.

You know, we can visualise and see how much it's changed even in that time, by use, popularity and that's great. It's fabulous if people want to come in and use it and do that.

But it’s then just balancing those bits where you would like people to do certain things and not do other things. They would like to do certain things and, you know, we can’t necessarily permit that to occur.

And it is just that balancing, and information gathering and sharing, trying to explain to people why we do things in certain ways. You know, the park has a breeding bird population, for example.

Sarah:

Does it?

Martin:

Yeah, lots of breeding bird populations and on the back of the crags, which in itself has an Iron Age fort running along it, in the springtime and through the beginning of summer, we’ll put up a fence that asks dog walkers not to walk on that because we have skylarks nesting in that area.

And they will nest on the ground and they will be disturbed by people and more likely by dogs off the lead because dogs, being dogs, like to go and investigate lots of areas.

Now we get some pushback on that, because people think it’s a park and they should be able to walk their dog wherever they like. We get other people who are very understanding as to what we’re trying to do and trying to achieve.

It’s just a mixture of people and that’s what I’m meaning by, you know, as one minor example of conflict between different priorities and different needs that we have to try to balance.

Sarah:

What’s the strangest thing you’ve ever encountered?

Martin:

I had a student’s entire bedroom on top of the summit one morning.

Which, to be fair, give them kudos, they'd brought everything – the furniture, the wardrobe, the bed, the mattress.

Sarah:

No…

Martin:

Yep, yep. And the duvet covers. Everything, the whole lot.

Sarah:

And it was on top of Arthur's Seat?

Martin:

Yeah, his mates had decided that they'd pair it. So, I mean, he had some very hefty mates that could get them up there.

That's probably one of the stranger things I've come across.

Sarah:

That is so excessive. Was it just a bit of a practical joke?

Martin:

Yeah, it just moved his whole university hall bedroom up to the top of the summit.

Sarah:

So, what did you do with that?

Martin:

Well, we had to get it down. So that just involved us all going up and having to take bits of it down, basically. So, yeah. But, yeah, I think that's probably...

Sarah:

I like to think that maybe those students were archaeology ones, and they were just trying to recreate some kind of forgotten roundhouse, maybe?

Or perhaps they were looking to leave some part of the present for future generations to discover? Yeah?

Chapter 12

43:30

Sarah:

I left Holyrood Park with a real sense of excitement.

The work that John, Rachel and Martin, the team of rangers do here in this otherwise unassuming space is important and, in a strange way, elevates the park for me.

It's humbling to realise that as we go about our daily lives on a park run, walking the dog, playing a game or just cycling through, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, connecting us to generations long gone and yet, in some ways, more present than ever.

It strikes me how easy it would be to walk away thinking you've just had a nice day out, but once you know what's beneath your feet, it's impossible to see it that way again, and one day someone else will walk this ground, unaware of us, yet still shaped by the same place.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

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

Next time, I'm heading to one of Scotland's most famous locations, Loch Ness.

We're visiting Urquhart Castle, a site fought over by both the Scottish and English during both Wars of Independence.

And, of course, we might be on the hunt for a certain mythical creature too.

See you then.