

I bumped into a friend at the weekend. He is part of a team restoring an old church near his home. Actually, it's more than just an old church; he now knows that it's a medieval church, which is very old indeed.

During the week, there is a whole army working in there – an archaeologist, an architect and various workers who are doing the restoration work. They are specialists trained to restore ancient buildings like this. So not only do they know stonemasonry or joinery or whatever, but they also understand the techniques and materials in use when the building was built or extended.

They have started pulling stuff out, marking on each piece where it came from, so that everything can be put back where it should. That's not to say everything is going back where it came from. Part of the research being done at the moment is to try and establish where things were originally and what changes have been made to the building over the years. Decisions will then have to be made about what will be put back, what will be put somewhere else, what will be thrown away and what needs to be created anew.

It's not as straightforward as putting everything back to how it was originally, as the building has been extended (we don't yet know how many times), doors have been blocked up and windows put in. The building itself is a lovely one – a good size and an interesting shape, representing a sort of ecclesiastical history of the congregation and the town.

I'm afraid history was never one of my strong subjects at school. I can vaguely remember Mr Miller demonstrating how one set of soldiers managed to slaughter the other lot at Culloden by attacking the guy to the side instead of the one in front. Not much knowledge for four years of study. I prefer to learn my history by having someone show me things, and telling me stories while I look and touch. I keep

on picking up 'History of Scotland' books but somehow fail to get past the Picts and the Scots. So when he offered to give me a tour, I jumped at the chance.

The building suffers from rising damp, and their first task was to dig drains around it, remove the harling and try and make it wind and watertight. They have taken up all the floors and are digging down in the oldest parts of the church.

My friend told me that before the reformation, burials took place inside the church itself, and so now they are digging up a multitude of human bones. It seems as though the graves have been disturbed before, maybe every time another burial took place, and they think the bones were just put back any old way. At the very bottom of the part they are digging in just now there is a complete skeleton and above that a jumble of bones.

The skeleton has been taken away so that it can be properly analysed, but the loose bones are just being identified, counted and re-buried in the same place. The floor will be put back down and the bones laid to rest until the next restoration.

We were able to see bones sticking out of the soil, and even to handle bits of skull and other large pieces. It was a strange feeling. Because they were so old, it didn't feel distasteful to be handling bits of a human body, but it was weird nonetheless.

The church had that quiet and stillness common to places of worship, and I felt that the people working here were showing respect to the remains of the people who were buried in this place. I am only sorry that the skeleton will be buried in the graveyard once the tests on it are finished. Someone thought it important that it be buried inside the church and it is a pity that their wishes cannot be kept, but the floor has to be put back down and it can't wait until the tests are completed.

I'm grateful I had the chance to look round, and am sure the wonder will remain even after all the work is done and the floor is back down again.