

Archaeological dig uncovers artifacts

June 29 2011

Scientific equipment belonging to an Enlightenment figure has been found in an archaeological dig at the University.

The eighteenth-century items, including laboratory apparatus and brightly coloured chemicals, almost certainly were the property of Joseph Black.

Black was Professor of Chemistry at Edinburgh and is best known for his discovery of [carbon dioxide gas](#).

Included in the finds are samples of [mercury](#), [arsenic](#) and [cobalt](#).

These were discovered together with glass tubes and other vessels, bottle stoppers, [thermometers](#) and storage jars.

Also uncovered were ceramic distillation apparatus made by Josiah Wedgwood.

The dig is being carried out at Old College prior to a £1 million landscaping of the quadrangle which is being funded by a private donor.

Archaeologists have already unearthed remnants of the buildings close to the spot where Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley - the second husband of Mary Queen of Scots - was murdered.

The landscaping is one of several key improvement projects taking place as part of a major five-year fundraising initiative, the £350 million

University of Edinburgh Campaign.

Black was a student at Edinburgh from 1752-54 and went on to become Professor of Chemistry in 1766.

He was a key figure in the Enlightenment and was an associate of Adam Smith and David Hume, among others.

After his retirement, Black's accoutrements were stored in the cellar of the seventeenth-century University Library, on the north side of what is now Old College.

The library was demolished in 1820, during later rebuilding.

Dr. Robert Anderson, Eminent curator and Black expert, said: "The age and style of the items and the location in which they were discovered all point towards their having belonged to Joseph Black himself. The discovery is wonderful new evidence of Black's working practices."

Archaeologists have made the key discovery during the UNESCO International Year of Chemistry in 2011.

The landscaping of Old College quadrangle fulfils the vision of architect William Henry Playfair, who completed the landmark building originally designed by Robert Adam.

It replaces the quadrangle's grey gravel surface with honey-coloured sandstone paving stones and creates a new lawn.

The excavation is being directed by Tom Addyman of Addyman Archaeology, a division of Simpson & Brown, the University's architects for the landscaping of the quadrangle, in consultation with the City of Edinburgh Council.

There is no better time than during the International Year of [Chemistry](#) to unearth these chemicals and apparatus belonging to one of the finest minds of the Enlightenment.

"They add another dimension to the finds relating to historic buildings that have been revealed from the great opportunity to see what lay under the gravel in the Quad," said Professor Mary Bownes, Vice Principal.

Provided by University of Edinburgh

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