

Human remains uncovered at site of Mercat Cross?

THE DEBACLE over the new “street furniture” installed next to the historic Mercat Cross in Dornoch has taken a new twist.

Workmen involved in the project dug up human remains and then reburied them without informing the authorities, it is claimed.

And the Highland Council have admitted that, incredibly, no archaeological survey was undertaken prior to the work starting.

The four huge granite bollards and circular granite plinth met with universal condemnation when they were installed recently.

Critics said they did not match their historic surrounding and demanded they be removed.

Highland Council has since bowed to pressure and agreed to rip the offending items out.

Local resident and keen historian Richard Easson, the Deanery, took an interest in the scheme as it was progressing and kept a photographic record.

He snapped a series of pictures as contractors M M Miller of Wick forged ahead with the £24,000 scheme.

When he enlarged one of the photographs on his computer he spotted what he thought was a human bone.

Mr Easson said: “It looked like either an arm or leg bone and was just lying on top of a stone.”

He said the discovery did not surprise

him, given the antiquity of the Mercat Cross and its proximity to Dornoch Cathedral.

The graveyard surrounding the cathedral at one time extended out beyond the boundary wall which was only erected in Victorian times.

Mr Easson is now querying whether an archaeological survey was undertaken prior to excavation work starting for the new street furniture.

He said: “Normally in a conservation area and indeed anywhere of historic significance you would have an archaeologist look over the site first before work went ahead.”

Mr Easson passed on the photograph to Peter Wild, curator of local museum, Historylinks, who in turned passed it to Historic Scotland’s local representative, Ann Coombs.

She declined to comment this week.

Meanwhile another Dornoch resident was made aware of the photograph and took it upon himself to report the matter to police and also to Historic Scotland.

The resident, who refused to be named, said: “If you find human remains you must inform police even if in cases like this it is just a formality.”

A spokeswoman for Historic Scotland confirmed earlier this week that a bone had been found.

“A bone, which could possibly be human, was uncovered by contractors during the works in the vicinity of the

Mercat Cross,” she said. “It was not reported to Highland Council or Historic Scotland, but we understand that it was reburied in the area where it was found.

“The paving and bollards near the Mercat Cross are to be removed in the near future under archaeological supervision.

“It is likely that the bone will then be recovered and fully assessed at this point.”

Historic Scotland previously indicated that, although they had been informed two years ago of the possibility of public works around the Mercat Cross, they did not know works had begun until late March this year.

Their permission is required as the work undertaken lay within a two-metre exclusion zone surrounding the Cross which is a scheduled ancient monument.

They are now in talks with the local authority about damage caused to the sandstone base of the cross.

A Highland Council spokesman has admitted that no archaeological investigation took place before work started on the street furniture scheme.

He said: “There was no archaeological survey done in advance of work starting.

“However, we can give an assurance that an archaeologist will be present when we come to re-do the work.

“We are aware that something that might have been a bone was found by the contractors and was re-buried.”