

Chapter 9: Discussion and conclusions

by Angela Boyle and Ceridwen Boston

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological proposals for mitigating the impact of the proposed works on the surviving archaeology at St George's church, Bloomsbury, were outlined in a Written Scheme of Investigation. Due to the acknowledged historical and archaeological potential of this burial assemblage it was decided that Oxford Archaeology should be in attendance on the exhumation company BGS, in order to record the material culture of late Georgian/early Victorian funerals and osteological data from the skeletal assemblage. The work also included limited structural recording of areas of Hawksmoor's church, such as the crypt, the western stairwells, an early well and a possible undercroft on the eastern side of the churchyard, and below-ground structures in areas flanking the steps at the front of the building.

RESEARCH ISSUES IN POST-MEDIEVAL BURIAL

Research issues in post-medieval archaeology were recently defined in some detail (Reeve 1998, 222). It is clear that the relationship between the historical documentation and the condition of the archaeological material (both skeletal and artefactual) is critical. Areas of particular concern include:

- *Funerary archaeology*. Including charnel pits, mass graves, artefact developments, taxonomies, social and gender archaeology, the English funeral, ownership and choice of vaults, burials as entities, graveyard methodology, location of interments in relation to memorials
- *Osteoarchaeology*. Including palaeodemography and demography, biological anthropology, pathology, epidemiology, osteological methodology (pathology, age and sex, stature), forensic science, clinical medicine, genealogy
- *Archaeological methodology*. Theory and practice, curation procedures and environments
- *Evidence for known historical events*, such as epidemics

Although the clearance of burials from churchyards and crypts has accelerated in recent years, there is still no recognised research agenda for post-medieval burial within London. This is an omission

which is currently being addressed by the Archaeological Advisor for the London Diocese (John Schofield pers. comm.).

Although slow in starting, the archaeological and documentary potential of post-medieval burial is now recognised. Whilst Christ Church, Spitalfields, remains the type-site for this period, a growing number of burial clearances in London have undergone detailed osteoarchaeological and/or historical investigation. These include excavations at St Marylebone, Westminster, the Crossbones cemetery, Southwark, the Davenant Centre in White Chapel Road, and St George-the-Martyr, Southwark, (all MoLAS); St Pancras, Clerkenwell, (Giffords, PCA and MoLAS); St Bride's, and the Devonport buildings, Greenwich, and St Luke's, Islington (OA). Many of the above sites are still in progress or exist as grey literature.

In this report, an attempt has been made to compare data from a number of these sites. It is hoped that a wider synthesis will be undertaken in the future, in particular, making comparisons between assemblages of different social class. Considerably more research into working class burials of this period is required, their importance having been somewhat eclipsed by burials of the 'middling sort'. This may in part be redressed by the White Chapel Road and Southwark burial excavations, when this data becomes available.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL VALUE OF THE ST GEORGE'S ASSEMBLAGE

The archaeological resource at St George's was assessed according to a series of criteria prior to commencement of work. The criteria were: completeness, condition, rarity, historical documentation and group value. These are summarised below:

Completeness

The completeness and integrity of the human skeletal assemblage from St George's crypt was considerable, with the majority of elements of the skeletons retrieved from the open coffins.

Condition

Conditions within the crypt were largely dry, with the exception of the lower courses in Vaults 4 and 5, where considerable mould had developed. Accumulation of water in the lowest stacks of coffin

in these vaults had preserved textiles, such as shrouds and inner coffin linings in a small number of coffins.

Unlike other church sites, such as St Luke's church, Islington, there had been no illicit interference with the dead. The coffins in Vaults 1-6 do not appear to have been disturbed since their relocation in the mid-19th century. The most severe destruction of coffins was as a result of the vertical stacking of coffins which had led to crushing of coffins in the lower levels of stacks. This did limit identification of upholstery stud patterns on the side panels of a large proportion of the coffins, but as the lids were frequently well preserved, recovery of upholstery stud patterns, lid motifs, escutcheons and breast-plates was generally very good.

The condition of the coffins in Vault 7 was very different from the condition of coffins Vaults 1 – 6. These coffins had been moved in recent times and had suffered considerable modern damage and interference, resulting in the destruction of many and disturbance of their skeletal remains.

Nevertheless, considerable new information on coffin fittings typologies was retrieved from the overall assemblage.

The preservation of the skeletal material was generally good, although the presence of bran and sawdust in many coffins had had a deleterious effect on the bone, with demineralisation apparent on many skeletons. Nevertheless, preservation was sufficiently good to provide valuable demographic data.

Rarity

Although it is clear that other similar post-medieval assemblages survive in London, many have been excavated by exhumation companies, with little or no recording of the material culture of these burials or depositional sequences. Consequently, they have limited archaeological and historical value.

The size of the St George's assemblage and the good state of preservation both of the coffins and human remains, combined with the documentary evidence, does enhance the rarity and research potential of the group. The unprecedented number of named individuals allowed for valuable blind testing of osteological methods (Chapter 7 above, and Appendix 2), that has considerable value in refining such methodologies in the future.

The *depositum* plate inscriptions complement other sources of information, such as parish records, for the burials in the parish in the period 1803-1856. Surviving parish burial records were particularly valuable in contrasting the structure of the crypt sample with the wider Bloomsbury population, and comparisons with London Bills of Mortality have highlighted the differences between the crypt population, which is predominantly middle and upper class, with the wider populous of the city.

The biographical data collected from coffin plate inscriptions is of great historical value, representing

as it does 90.5% of the burials within the crypt. The crypt interments predate in large measure the introduction of civil registration of births, marriages and deaths. The considerable documentary evidence collected during the crypt clearance has greatly enhanced and complemented the archaeological information. There remains a considerable potential for more detailed historical analysis of families and individuals, beyond what has been possible in this report.

Group value

The value of the group is high due to the good state of preservation of the human bone assemblage and the high proportion of named individuals. More detailed comparisons with the growing number of contemporary assemblages does warrant considerably more research.

Research potential

With this in mind it was argued that the resource would have the potential to address a limited number of research objectives as follows:

- Development of the crypt and graveyard through time by discussion of stratigraphy and formation processes on site
- Enhancement of our understanding of post-medieval funerary contexts and the archaeological techniques employed
- Enhancement of osteological techniques through the study of individuals of known age and sex
- Development of our knowledge of funerary rites and the treatment of the dead
- Analysis of the construction, use and modification of the crypt structure.

The aim of the archaeological work was to record and interpret as much detail as was possible within the parameters of a relatively rapid exhumation and re-interment exercise. It was expected that the archaeological data collected would contribute to the study of the history and development of funeral trends and the demography of the population of the crypt.

The objectives of the archaeological work were to record the preservation conditions within the crypt and churchyard, the inscriptions on coffin plates, the human remains and undertake limited sampling of human skeletal remains with biographical data.

THE REBURIAL DEBATE

The crypt clearance at St George's required a Faculty, one of the conditions of which was that all burials (including both skeleton *and* coffin) would

be sleeved and reburied within a very limited period by BGS. Reburial was ongoing during the crypt clearance, and coffins and their contents were reinterred as soon as osteological analysis was completed. St George's church is not alone in having a requirement for relatively rapid reburial of human remains. This has considerable implication fieldwork approaches and for the further research potential of assemblages of this period.

Recent relevant developments

Guidelines relating to crypt clearance were recently produced by the IFA (Cox 2001). Although the IFA had previously produced guidelines for the excavation of human remains (McKinley and Roberts 1993), these related primarily to the excavation of skeletons from earth-cut graves. Prior to the publication in 2001 no guidelines or protocols existed for the excavation of burials in crypts or where soft tissue survived. The aim of Cox's paper (*ibid*, 14) was to 'set out a protocol that seems appropriate in light of the Spitalfields experience and that experienced by archaeologists involved with the recent dead elsewhere (e.g. Boyle and Keevill 1998; Bashford and Pollard 1998).'

The most recent version of the Archaeology Policy of the London DAC was issued in January 2005 and took account of the report produced by the Human Remains Working Group and published by English Heritage (Mays 2005). Archaeological contractors are now required to frame their WSIs within this policy. In its executive summary the Working Group states 'If burial grounds, or areas within burial grounds, which may contain interments more than 100 years old have to be disturbed – whether for minor building work or larger scale development – to a depth that is likely to disturb burials, the relevant areas should be archaeologically evaluated. Any subsequent exhumations should be monitored, and if necessary carried out, by archaeologists' (Mays 2005, 4). In the DAC view, there should be archaeological recording in a crypt clearance. A crypt often contains hundreds, if not thousands, of coffins and skeletons. The health and safety issues are significant and affect the nature and extent of archaeological work. National guidelines are available and continue to be developed. The archaeological project which excavated 18th- and 19th-century coffins in the crypt of Christ Church, Spitalfields in the 1980s has become a national standard of what can be achieved (Reeve and Adams 1993). Early consultation with the DAC, English Heritage and the local planning authority is recommended if crypt clearance is contemplated.

The following recommendations made by the Working Party are particularly significant:

- Excavated human remains shown after due assessment to have limited research potential should be studied and then reburied
- Reburial should normally be by inhumation rather than by cremation
- When excavated human remains are more than 100 years old and have significant future research potential, deposition in a suitable holding institution should be arranged. Redundant churches or crypts provide an acceptable compromise between the desirability of deposition in a consecrated place and the desirability of continued research access. This has already done in some instances. A working party, to succeed the Human Remains Working Group, should be set up to pursue this, looking in particular at funding and at establishing proper working practices.

At the annual conference of the Institute of Field Archaeologists in Winchester in 2005 a session entitled 'The excavation of post-medieval cemeteries: why, when and how? (but not necessarily in that order)' was organised by Jacqueline McKinley of Wessex Archaeology and Simon Mays of English Heritage. The writers were asked to contribute because of their involvement in the St Luke's project, as well as a number of other similar jobs in London and elsewhere (for example Boyle 2004).

Archaeological excavation of post-medieval cemeteries is a relatively new phenomenon. Until c 20 years ago most burials of this date were subject to removal by cemetery clearance companies with no archaeological involvement. This changed with the work at Christ Church, Spitalfields in the 1980s as archaeologists and osteologists demonstrated the immense wealth of information, relating to all aspects of the burials, which could be recovered, particularly where the archaeological data could be linked to written records.

There are a large number of post-medieval cemeteries containing an immense number of burials and with ever increasing pressure on land and the need to update church buildings to the needs of the 21st century, growing numbers of such cemeteries (and crypts) are being totally or partially cleared. Archaeologists are commonly being asked to undertake such work, but the levels of recording and analysis required may vary from cemetery to cemetery and archaeologists need to ensure that they are not simply a more 'politically correct' method of clearance. Archaeologists who took part in the session considered what types of information might be obtained and what constitutes an appropriate level of investigation and recording. It was recognised that is necessary to ensure that methodologies for on-site archaeological recording not only accommodate the practical demands imposed by exhumation works but also generate data sets of real analytical value.

- If living close family members are known and request it, excavated human remains should be reburied

CONCLUSION

The St George's crypt clearance was extremely challenging, both for the archaeologists who took part and indeed for BGS the exhumation company. The logistics were complex, given the unexpected number of coffins, and it took effort from both parties to achieve an acceptable method of working together. The approach to the archaeology had previously been employed with success at St Nicholas, Sevenoaks, (Boyle and Keevill

1998), the Quaker cemetery at London Road, Kingston-upon-Thames (Bashford and Pollard 1998; Start and Kirk 1998), St Bartholomew's church, Penn (Boyle 2004) and subsequently at St Luke's church, Islington (Boyle *et al.* 2005). The osteological and artefactual analysis of the material from St George's has yielded an enormous amount of valuable information on both burial practice and the population who were interred in the church.