

**'Safe moor'd in Greenwich tier':  
A study of the skeletons of Royal Navy sailors and  
marines excavated at the Royal Hospital Greenwich**

*by Ceridwen Boston, Annsofie Witkin, Angela Boyle and David R P Wilkinson*

with contributions by

*Leigh Allen, Duncan H Brown, Bethan Charles, Brian Dean,  
Lorraine Lindsay-Gale and Nicholas Marquez-Grant*

Illustrations by

*Markus Dylewski, Amy Hemingway and Georgina Slater*

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## Summary

Between July 1999 and September 2001, Oxford Archaeology (OA) undertook detailed archaeological works at Devonport Buildings, King William Walk, Greenwich, London, on behalf of Mount Anvil. These works were in advance of redevelopment, which comprised a new Conference Facility, Student Accommodation and an electricity sub-station. The proposed redevelopment lay within an area formerly used as the ratings' burial ground of the Royal Hospital Greenwich and originally had contained the remains of an estimated 20,000 retired seamen and marines of the Royal Navy, interred between 1749 and 1856. Most Greenwich pensioners were veterans of Britain's wars with the Dutch, the Americans, the Spanish, the French Republic and Napoleon. This report includes the results of the desk-based assessment, archaeological evaluation, watching briefs and excavation phases of the project.

A total of 107 skeletons were recovered from 55 graves. As may be expected, the majority were older adult males, but a small number of women and adolescents were also present. The assemblage was remarkable for the high prevalence of a wide range of pathological conditions, which included numerous fractures, rickets, tuberculosis, syphilis, scurvy, cancer and a range of non-specific infections. Amputations and craniotomies were also identified. These clearly illustrate the rigours of life in the Royal Navy at this time, and reflect the advance age of the assemblage.

Evidence for wooden coffins and shrouds was recovered from many graves, the former represented

by iron coffin fittings and nails. Unfortunately, due to severe iron corrosion, no individuals could be identified from breastplate inscriptions. Small quantities of pottery, ceramic building material, animal bone, glass and clay pipe were recovered from the grave fills but appeared to be residual. In addition to graves, a small number of other features were excavated, including the foundations of a number of brick-built structures, pits and ditches. Most post-dated the use of the cemetery.

Although it was not possible to identify individuals, a wide range of documentary sources on the retired seamen and marines from the Royal Hospital Greenwich were consulted. This has greatly aided in the interpretation of the assemblage.

From the time of the Napoleonic Wars, interest in Nelson and the Royal Navy has remained intense, and military historians have devoted considerable attention to battle tactics, the structure of the ships of the line, and biographical details of Nelson and other commanders. Interest in the social context of the Royal Navy, in particular the daily life of the ratings or common seamen and marines, is relatively recent and is historical in approach. The skeletal sample of the Greenwich pensioners is unique in being the only large assemblage of Royal Navy veterans to undergo systematic osteological analysis. Coupled with the sheer range of pathological conditions, its uniqueness makes this specialist assemblage one of considerable osteological importance, and one that warrants more research in the future.

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for permission to reproduce the discharge certificate of Corporal George Frederick Eller, Royal Marines. We are also grateful for the input of Pieter van der Merwe of the National Maritime Museum, Roy and Lesley Adkins, Hedley Swain, Bill White and Roy Stephenson of the Museum of London, and Jane Sidell, Archaeological Scientific Advisor of English Heritage.

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The quotation in the title is taken from William Spavens, *Memoirs of a seafaring life: the narrative of William Spavens on the Navy Chest at Chatham, 1796*, Rodger N A M (ed), Folio Society, 2002, London, page 99.

Thanks are due also to Greenwich Hospital, the Navy's oldest charity, which still operates today providing charitable support and education to serving and retired personnel of the Royal Navy and Royal Marines and their dependants.

