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3 Approaches to Post-medieval Burial in England: Past and Present

Introduction

This paper is based on my own personal experience while working on a range of post-medieval burials for a major UK commercial business: Oxford Archaeology. The views expressed are entirely my own. Information on other burials is derived from published sources and is not intended to be exhaustive.

The involvement of commercial archaeology companies in the study of post-medieval burial grounds is becoming a relatively mainstream activity. While this is now a country-wide phenomenon, the main focus of investigation continues to take place in London and the south-east, although notable exceptions elsewhere in the country include non-Conformist burial grounds at Swinton, Greater Manchester (Gibson 2014, pp. 15-16) and Coronation Street, South Shields, Tyne and Wear (Rowland and Loe *in press*).

The annual review produced by BABA0¹ (British Association of Biological Anthropologists and Osteologists) for 2013 includes summary reports on the investigation of 12 post-medieval burial grounds carried out by different archaeological contractors across the country (Appleby, 2014, pp. 12-25).

It is now 30 years since the ground-breaking investigation of the crypt at Christ Church, Spitalfields began and 21 years since its publication (Molleson and Cox, 1993; Reeve and Adams, 1993). This was soon followed by the publication of an edited volume of papers which arose out of a conference on 'Death and Burial in England 1700-1850' held at Bournemouth University in 1997 (Cox, 1998). The conference was heavily over-subscribed due to the increasing number of sites being investigated and the rising popularity of the subject so its duration and scope was increased. The speed with which this publication appeared was a direct result of the strong feeling of its contributors and all chapters contained therein are required reading for any student of post-medieval burial. It is worth quoting from the introduction:

'...the value of post-medieval archaeology as a provider of archaeological analogues, and as a means of examining and developing both archaeological and other scientific theories and methodologies is now fully appreciated' (Cox, 1998, p. xv).

¹ BABA0 was set up in 1999. The organisation promotes the study of biological anthropology for the purpose of understanding humanity from the past to the present. It also provides a forum for discussion and intellectual exchange for professionals and students in all areas of biological anthropology, <http://www.babao.org.uk/>.

This chapter will attempt to consider approaches to the examination of post-medieval burial grounds over the last 30 years by summarising a small number of key sites and assessing how such projects are approached in the present. Can it be demonstrated that there is now a more unified approach? Is the value of the post-medieval burial resource generally accepted and understood within the archaeological community? The recent publication of a comprehensive review of post-medieval burial in the United Kingdom might suggest that the answer to these questions is in the affirmative (Cherryson et al., 2012). Some criticisms were raised: for example many reports exist only as grey literature and often the bone report is entirely separate from the description of the archaeology. Nonetheless, archaeological engagement with post-medieval burial is very clearly moving in the appropriate direction.

3.1 Archaeological Context

A varied range of remains is to be encountered in the study of post-medieval burial. These include substantial or small crypts within churches, brick-built vaults, single-shaft graves, earth-cut graves, lead coffins, wooden coffins, church interiors and graveyards. Burials from any given assemblage often span the medieval and post-medieval periods and, certainly in the past, this has led to conflict in the nature of the archaeological response (for example, St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks, Kent, see below). The archaeological contractor is generally faced with a burial ground that contains tens of thousands of burials, often heavily disturbed and intercut with lots of partial, disarticulated and re-deposited remains. These factors can make stratigraphic interpretation difficult. Many coffins are often stacked one on top of another. There are often time pressures, financial constraints, Health and Safety and logistical issues combined with the necessity of collaborating with exhumation contractors. For all of these reasons, sampling is usually required and it is essential to be selective (Cherryson et al., 2012, p. 160). The archaeological excavation at New Bunhills non-Conformist burial ground in Southwark, London is a good recent example of a sensible and successful sampling strategy (see below).

While the majority of assemblages discussed here are from churches and graveyards within the jurisdiction of the Church of England, it is increasingly the case that non-Conformist burial grounds are being excavated in response to threats from development and there are a number of good-quality recent publications concerned with these (eg., Bashford & Siburn, 2007; Brown & Hardy, 2011; Henderson et al., 2013; McCarthy et al., 2012; McKinley, 2008; Miles with Connell, 2012; Webb & Norton, 2009).

3.2 Logistical and Ethical Issues

The ‘peculiar personnel and logistical management requirements’ (Reeve & Adam 1993, p. vi) inherent in the study of post-medieval burial have been dealt with in a number of other publications over the years (e.g. Adams & Reeve, 1989; Boyle, 1999; Cox, 1989; Cox, 1994; Cox, 1996a and b; Cox, 2001; Faulkner, 1994; Huggins, 1994; Kirk & Start, 1999; Kneller, 1998; Morris, 1994; Parker Pearson, 1995; Philp, 1995; Reeve, 1997; Reeve & Cox, 1999; Young, 1998) and will only be touched upon here. Among other things, these publications deal with aspects of health and safety, psychological effects on project personnel and ethical concerns.

3.3 Review of Selected Projects

The sites which appear in the following sections are not exclusively those that I have been involved with. Some others are included because they have made a significant contribution to the development of the subject (for example, Christ Church, Spitalfields) or, in my opinion, demonstrate a sensible and successful approach (for example, sampling at New Bunhills, Southwark). The sites are organised in the order that they were examined and all of the Oxford Archaeology projects appear in Table 3.1.

3.3.1 Christ Church, Spitalfields, London

Christ Church, Spitalfields, was the first post-medieval burial resource to have been comprehensively investigated by archaeological methods (Reeve & Adams, 1993, p.1; see also Molleson & Cox, 1993). Excavation took place between 1984 and 1986. It is notable that, in the opening lines, the authors emphasise that the validity of the anthropological studies is underpinned by the archaeological context. Chapter Two of the first volume details the actual process of excavation, partly because many difficulties were encountered which are not common to other archaeological investigations. The archaeological formation processes which operated on the deposits at Christ Church were also key. Commercial clearance by an exhumation company of the vaults was originally considered as an option. However, the Incumbent and the Parochial Church Council agreed to an archaeological excavation, provided that it could be funded by grants. This is in marked contrast to virtually all other large-scale post-medieval burial projects where sampling is the norm and work is usually carried out alongside exhumation contractors. It has rightly been commented elsewhere that, ‘Although the project [Christ Church] is in many ways a model, it is in many ways an exceptional one,’ (Cherryson et al., 2012, p. 160).

Table 3.1: Summary of sites examined by Oxford Archaeology and mentioned in text.

| Site name | Site type | Project design | Evaluation | Excavation ¹ | Exhumation | Type of intervention | Approximate date of burials | Total number of individuals excavated | Publication |
|---|-----------------------|----------------|------------|-------------------------|------------|--|-----------------------------|---|--|
| St Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks, Kent | Church and churchyard | Yes | No | Yes | Yes | Full excavation of church interior; partial excavation of churchyard | ?medieval-1875 | 450 burials/360 skeletons | Oxford Archaeology, Boyle and Keevill 1998; Boyle 1999; |
| St Bartholomew's Church, Penn, Wolverhampton | Churchyard | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Partial graveyard clearance | ?medieval-1899; | 372 skeletons | Oxford Archaeology, Boyle 2004 |
| St Luke's Church, Old Street, Islington, London | Crypt and graveyard | Yes | Yes | No | Yes | Full crypt and graveyard clearance | 1751-1880 | 1053 burials/896 skeletons | Oxford Archaeology, Bradley and Boyle 2004; Boyle et al., 2005, www.academia.edu |
| Royal Naval Hospital, Greenwich, London | Cemetery | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Partial excavation of cemetery | 1749-1857 | 107 skeletons | Oxford Archaeology, Boston et al., 2008 |
| St George's Church, Bloomsbury, London | Crypt | Yes | No | No | Yes | Full crypt clearance | 1804-1856 | 781 burials/111 skeletons | Oxford Archaeology, Boston et al., 2009, www.academia.edu |
| Swinton, Greater Manchester | Churchyard | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Archaeological excavation and exhumation ³ | 1863-1962 | 112 discrete articulated skeletons ⁴ | Oxford Archaeology, analysis ongoing (brief note in Gibson 2014, 15) |
| Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford | Hospital cemetery | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Excavation | 1770-1885 | 360 discrete articulated skeletons, 23 articulated limbs, disarticulated bone from 5 charnel pits ¹⁶ . | Oxford Archaeology, analysis ongoing, (brief note in Gibson 2014, 16). |

1 Here the term excavation is used to refer to traditional archaeological excavation which is carried out independently of any exhumation process.

2 A small number of 20th century burials were removed solely by exhumation contractors.

3 The exhumed remains comprised all those that were not fully skeletonised; that were in sealed, intact coffins, whether wood, lead or any other such material; that were ancestors of family members who had specifically requested that no analysis be carried out; that could be definitely identified as having been interred after 1900. All such remains were removed and reburied by exhumation contractors (Peter Mitchell Associates).

4 Total does not include exhumed remains.

3.3.2 St Nicholas' Church Sevenoaks, Kent

My first involvement with post-medieval burial was at St Nicholas' Church in 1993. The Parochial Church Council's (PCC) project at St Nicholas, Sevenoaks, *Building for the Gospel*, planned to create a suite of parish rooms as an undercroft below the existing floor levels. This involved excavation of the space below the floor to a depth of c 4m thereby destroying all archaeological deposits within the medieval parish church (Boyle & Keevill, 1998, 85). St Nicholas first appears in documentary sources in the *Textus Roffensis*² of 1122 and, not surprisingly, the main thrust of the excavation was aimed at recovering evidence of the earliest church structure which was potentially pre-Conquest, and tracing its development through time.

'The study of the resulting human remains and coffin fittings, particularly of the post-medieval period was always seen as an issue of lower priority' (1998, p. 86).

It was clear that burial had occurred throughout the medieval and post-medieval periods, though to all intents and purposes (and in accordance with the project brief) post-medieval, and in particular, 18th and 19th century burials, were not considered to be archaeologically significant. It was decided that they should be removed by a professional clearance company while the archaeological excavation progressed.

During excavation logistical issues meant that archaeologists had to work alongside exhumation contractors (a clear precursor to the more common working practices of today). Although the PCC was initially reluctant to allow archaeological removal of coffin furniture once it was discovered that the intended method of coffin removal involved opening and removing their contents, it was agreed that coffin furniture should be removed and archaeologically recorded. OAU staff felt that the method of removal employed by the exhumation contractors was morally questionable (Boyle, 1999) and, on a more practical level, involved considerable destruction of potential archaeological information. There would be strong opposition today from many parties to the opening of sealed coffins. The speed and methods employed during this process and the depth at which several of the coffins lay necessitated rapid recording and implementation of a sampling strategy.

The original specification required that the human remains be assessed and recorded on site by an osteologist as excavation proceeded. Only basic skeletal data was recorded at this stage, including preservation and completeness, age, sex, stature and potential for future detailed analysis. It was a further condition of the specification that the skeletal remains would receive long-term storage in an ossuary to be provided by the PCC and would therefore be available for detailed analysis in the future. The recording of metrical, non-metrical, dental data and pathology was

² The *Textus Roffensis* is a medieval manuscript which contains among other things, two pre-Conquest and pre-Domesday Book lists of Kent parishes and copies of the earliest English law codes to survive. <http://cityark.medway.gov.uk/>

to be undertaken only following MAP-2 style assessment (English Heritage, 1991) and the selection of individuals or groups of skeletons. It was envisaged that where individuals of particular significance, either intrinsically or pathologically, required more detailed analysis, special provision would have to be made. The major problems inherent in what later became described as low-resolution recording are in relation to the calculation of completeness and prevalence of a trait or condition. In the initial stages of excavation the requirements for the basic recording of skeletal data were complied with. However, as the policy of the PCC on reburial and retention was revised during the excavation a decision was taken to increase the level of recording as far as possible to incorporate pathology, dental data and selected metric measurements. The definition of long-term storage was to become a significant issue: the archaeologists believed it meant permanent storage while the PCC saw it as a short- to medium-term alternative to permanent storage. In the event an ossuary for long-term storage was not provided.

The project brief was written before the publication of Christ Church and at the time it was by no means widely accepted that post-medieval burials were of particular archaeological interest. A considerable financial investment is necessary to cover aspects of conservation, analysis and storage of both skeletal remains and coffin fittings. The excavation at St Nicholas has not been fully published and the archive has not been deposited. It is regrettable that the entire assemblage of human remains was reburied in the churchyard at the request of the PCC some years ago in spite of the fact that an osteological report was never completed.

The detailed examination of a single individual with significant dentistry serves to highlight the unrealised potential of much of the assemblage (Cox et al., 2000). Nonetheless, the absence of a research agenda specific to post-medieval burial was a crucial factor in the final outcome of the project. Ultimately the attempt to fully record all the material archaeologically meant that there was very little money left for full analysis and publication. At the time both I and other team members questioned whether or not it is reasonable to expect the developer (often a PCC) to pay for full analysis of such material and in particular the cost of long-term storage of the archive in a museum (Boyle & Keevill 1998, p. 94).

It is easy now to be highly critical of the project and indeed many were (for a clearer idea of prevailing views at the time, see Cox 1994; Faulkner 1994; Huggins 1994; Morris 1994; Parker Pearson 1995; Philp 1995). Ten years later a far greater controversy raged over the burial ground at St Pancras (see below).

3.3.3 St Bartholomew's Church, Penn, Wolverhampton

Oxford Archaeology carried out an evaluation of this churchyard in 1994 in advance of the construction of an extension which would impact on a substantial area of 720 square metres. On the basis of the evaluation it was estimated

that the proposed development area was likely to contain anything from 250-500 burials and an unknown number of burial vaults. Initially it was hoped that further work would comprise detailed excavation of the cemetery combined with similarly detailed osteological analysis. With this in mind the Oxford Archaeological Unit submitted a Written Scheme of Investigation in 1998. By this stage the Parochial Church Council had retained an archaeological consultant, so a very detailed WSI was written in response to a similarly detailed Archaeological Brief. The WSI had outlined a system of osteological recording which comprised both high and low resolution analysis of skeletal remains³. After much negotiation between all interested parties it became apparent that, primarily for financial reasons, the PCC was unable to proceed in this manner. Ultimately the work consisted of an archaeological watching brief combined with low resolution osteological recording. This took place entirely on site over an eight week period alongside a company of exhumation contractors. Two archaeologists were present, one of whom was responsible for osteological recording, while the other dealt with the recording of stratigraphy, coffins and associated fittings etc. This was supplemented by short periods spent on site by myself and regular meetings with the Archaeological Consultant. From the outset I had serious reservations about how the proposed methodology would actually work in practice, and what, if any, archaeological and osteological information might be retrieved. However, it was clear by this stage that the level of archaeological input which I had originally outlined was certainly not going to go ahead. My reservations led me to consider my original justification for detailed recording at great length (see Boyle 2004 for a detailed discussion). Perhaps most pertinently it was a condition of the Church of England Faculty that human remains, coffins and coffin fittings were not to be removed under any circumstance. A total of 368 contexts were assigned. The full range of possible remains was encountered. There were seven large brick built vaults, four brick-built single shaft vaults, 14 lead coffins, 131 wooden ones and the remaining 212 were buried in earth-cut graves, presumably originally in shrouds. A number of these may well be late medieval in date although no dating evidence was recovered. Contrary to initial expectations it was possible to recover useful and interesting information relating to the 18th- and 19th-century population of the town (Boyle 2004).

³ The high-resolution sample consisted of named individuals and those with unusual pathology, evidence of surgical or dental intervention and exceptionally good preservation. Low-resolution skeletal recording included a skeletal and dental inventory, age and sex assessments, gross pathological observations, and basic metrical recording for use in the determination of stature and sex. The high-resolution sample was subject to the same recording criteria with the addition of detailed descriptions of pathological manifestations and differential diagnosis, additional metrical recording, and a study of non-metric traits.

3.3.4 St Luke's Church, Old Street, Islington, London

In 2000 work at the Grade 1 listed Hawksmoor church took place in advance of construction and refurbishment work to provide new educational and rehearsal facilities for the London Symphony Orchestra. When work started the church was a disused roofless structure surrounded by a graveyard. Oxford Archaeology was employed to work as sub-contractors alongside Necropolis (a firm of undertakers and commercial exhumation operatives) for the duration of the work. Working conditions were difficult: it was extremely wet, leading to instability of sections in the graveyard; the structure of the disused church and crypt below was unstable and had to be supported (Bradley and Boyle, 2004).

The work comprised recording of funerary architecture, and the crypt structure along with exhumation of all the burials in the crypt and graveyard. A total of 1053 burials ranging in date from 1751-1880 were archaeologically recorded. Osteological analysis was largely undertaken on site and completed in Oxford. The skeletal sample of 896 was divided into high- and low-resolution samples (see above). The high resolution sample comprised 241 named individuals who were osteologically recorded in full. The remainder were unnamed individuals; for this group basic demographic information was recovered, stature was calculated where possible, a detailed dental record was compiled and pathology recorded where seen.

For reasons of decency the Church Diocesan Fund had stipulated that sealed coffins should not be opened but instead should be removed for reburial. The entire assemblage of individuals was reburied along with coffin remains and associated fittings at Leatherhead Cemetery in 2001.

The main aim of the archaeological work at St Luke's was to record and interpret as much detail as possible within the parameters of a relatively rapid exhumation and re-interment exercise (Boyle et al., 2005). It was believed that the archaeological data would contribute to the history and development of funeral trends and the demography of the population of the crypt. Specific objectives of the archaeological work included the recording of the preservation conditions within the crypt and churchyard, the inscriptions on coffin plates, with recording of the human remains and *limited* sampling of human skeletal remains with biographical data.

3.3.5 Royal Hospital, Greenwich, London

Archaeological works comprising evaluation, excavation and a series of watching briefs were carried out by Oxford Archaeology between July 1999 and September 2001 in advance of redevelopment. It was estimated that *circa* 20,000 retired seamen marines of the Royal Navy were interred in the Old Burial Ground between 1749 and 1856. A total of 107 skeletons were recovered from 55 graves within the proposed

footprint. 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 wide range of pathological conditions, amputations and craniotomies. Interest in the social context of the Royal Navy is relatively recent and this assemblage is unique in being the only large group to undergo systematic osteological analysis. A brief report on a far smaller sample from the Royal Hospital Haslar, Gosport was recently published online (Shortland et al., 2008).

The Royal Hospital is rather unusual in the context of this paper in the sense that the project was a very 'traditional' one and followed standard procedures for excavation and recording followed by comprehensive publication. Exhumation contractors were not involved. The assemblage has not been reburied and has given rise to research projects on a variety of topics including cranial trauma and extra-masticatory wear (Boston et al., 2008, p. 152).

3.3.6 St George's Church, Bloomsbury, London

St George's church was designed by Hawksmoor and completed in 1731. The project was carried out during 2003 in advance of redevelopment of the crypt. In the first instance Oxford Archaeology were asked to carry out a desk based assessment with the aim of defining the archaeological resource and identifying its potential. The burial registers were consulted as part of this process and it immediately became apparent that no distinction had been made between those buried in the crypt and those buried in the parish graveyard. Furthermore, each of the vaults had been bricked up so at the commencement of work the likely number of burials was a complete unknown. Oxford Archaeology worked as a sub-contractor alongside Burial Ground Services (BGS, a professional exhumation company). Staff at OA had developed a good working relationship with BGS on previous projects (see above) and this was key to the success of the project at St George's Church.

The crypt contained 781 coffins found in seven vaults leading off the central chamber. The number of coffins within each of the seven vaults varied from 69 in vault 1 to as many as 139 in vault 7. All 781 coffins were triple-shelled, mostly comprising an upholstered wooden outer case over a lead shell which in turn covered an inner wooden coffin. All coffins and their associated fittings were recorded in full.

The names of 671 individuals were identified from the inscriptions on coffin plates and dated from 1804 to 1856 when the crypt was sealed. Unsurprisingly, documentary research on the named individuals confirmed that the burial population largely represented the wealthy upper class residents of Bloomsbury. Osteological analysis (357 subadults and 157 adults) of 111 skeletons recovered from breeched lead coffins was undertaken on site as work progressed. A total of 72 named individuals were subjected to full osteological analysis while the remaining 39 skeletons received a lower level of analysis. With the benefit of hindsight I would now agree that the entire

assemblage should have been osteologically recorded in full. The same would apply to the assemblages from St Luke's, Islington and St Nicholas, Sevenoaks.

3.3.7 St Pancras Old Church Burial Ground

This project is referred to here because of the controversy that it provoked among the general public and the archaeological community. St Pancras Old Church is often credited with pre-Conquest origins, however, it wasn't until the 18th century that substantial enlargement of the churchyard took place (Emery, 2006). It saw very heavy use and was finally closed in 1854. Approximately 7000 burials were exhumed in the 1860s under the supervision of the writer and poet Thomas Hardy when the Midland Railway was constructed. A second partial clearance was required much more recently to make way for the new London terminus for the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. Evaluation was not possible because the railway was operational both above and below ground. The burials were exhumed between February 2002 and June 2003 by Burial Ground Services while Gifford were appointed to carry out a watching brief in partnership with a field team from Pre-Construct Archaeology and specialists from the Museum of London.

From the outset, the archaeologists were working in what could only be described as extremely challenging circumstances due to extended working hours, poor lighting, access restrictions and availability of only limited space, all of which severely impacted recovery of archaeological data from a very intensively used cemetery. In order to mitigate these difficulties two small areas at the southern end of the cemetery were set aside for detailed archaeological recording, resulting in the controlled excavation of 83 skeletons combined with stratigraphic recording and definition of coffins. This attempt at compromise became unsustainable and for two days exhumation continued without archaeological monitoring. Amidst serious concerns raised by many interested parties including the Church of England, the Council for British Archaeology and Rescue, the process was halted and a new system of working was proposed. All excavation and lifting of human remains was to be carried out by exhumation operatives, there was to be no cleaning of coffins or their contents and archaeologists were to make their records from the trench edges. In response to the criticism from archaeologists that this would make creation of a meaningful record virtually impossible the system of working was again adjusted to allow for three-dimensional recording of coffins, which required the presence of archaeologists in the excavation area. This resulted in the recording of more than 1300 burials. The archaeological watching brief and the exhumation process were made much easier by this workable methodology. It has been argued (Emery, 2006) that the project is an excellent example of the hard decisions that archaeologists must sometimes make within a large and fast-moving project and how a clear understanding at an early stage of exactly what information is required for meaningful analysis is crucial (e.g.

three-dimensional recording). A productive outcome was in part due to the clarity of the archaeologists during discussion with the developers about which aspects of recording were most important to them.

The recent weighty publication (Emery and Wooldridge, 2011) is a good illustration of how productive the outcome was. It focuses on the southernmost ‘Third Ground’, where 1383 burials were recorded archaeologically. Analysis included reconstruction of coffin stack sequences within known burial rows, innovatively illustrated in 3D. A sample of 715 burials were osteologically analysed in full. This is an important sample as it comes from a graveyard rather than a crypt. Analysis revealed a heterogeneous population buried during a time of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. Preservation of human bone and coffins was exceptional, with inscribed coffin plates linking many burials with biographical detail. Identified individuals include refugees from the French Revolution, most notably three aristocrats and two prelates.

3.3.8 New Bunhills Burial Ground, Southwark, London

New Bunhills was a heavily-used private non-Conformist burial ground excavated by MOLA (Museum of London Archaeology) in 2008 as part of the development of the new Globe Academy. Documentary references suggested that the burial ground was in use from c 1821 to 1853 with as many as 33,000 interments taking place (Miles with Connell, 2012, p. xi). A total of 827 wooden coffins were recorded archaeologically allowing comparison of the use of the burial ground, coffin furniture and burial finds with other contemporary cemeteries.

The sampling strategy involved the excavation of a trench measuring 22 m by 12 m which equated to *circa* 9.7% of the cemetery by area although the lower portions of the burial sequence were not excavated because of Health and Safety concerns, particularly over the preservation of soft tissue. The deepest stack comprised 14 coffins. The remainder of the threatened area was cleared by commercial exhumation contractors while archaeological excavation proceeded. A total of 767 skeletons were assessed and a sub-sample of 514 was selected for full osteological analysis. It is noteworthy that the original excavation brief stipulated the recovery of a sample of 500 skeletons after which archaeological excavation would cease (Miles with Connell, 2012, p. 2). However, during excavation this strategy was modified in order to provide a less biased sample and work continued to recover a larger number of skeletons for sub-sampling during osteological assessment. A larger sample was excavated specifically to avoid bias towards the sub-adult remains, which mainly lay uppermost and thus were excavated first (2012, p. 60). A three-stage sample selection process was introduced during the on-site assessment phase. This comprised immediate reburial of skeletons which were poorly preserved or less than 60% complete (n=72) plus those with significant soft tissue surviving (n=91), followed by those which were less than 80% complete (n=90) leaving 514 skeletons which were fully analysed off-site. The authors commented:

‘In any burial ground analysis, targeting the more complete skeletons should ensure that maximum resources are focussed on material that will provide the most comprehensive and accurate data that can be correlated with other datasets.’ (Miles with Connell 2012, p. 62).

All burials were excavated individually, bagged and labelled. Each burial was allocated two separate context numbers, one for skeleton and one for coffin. Coffins were planned at 1:20 and levelled; skeletons were described and sketched. In other words the method of recording was standard with the proviso that,

‘As with the majority of post-medieval graveyards the grave cuts were not usually identifiable in the general graveyard soil, owing to the continual disturbance it underwent in use, but where they penetrated natural sand and gravels they were numbered, planned and described, although the full burial sequence was recorded only in limited areas of the site.’ (Miles with Connell 2012, p. 3).

3.4 Advisory Bodies, Guidelines and Research Agendas

This section considers advisory bodies in England, published guidelines and concludes with research agendas.

3.4.1 APABE (Advisory Panel on Archaeological Burial Grounds in England)

The origins of APABE lie in its previous incarnation as APACBE. The panel was set up in 2005 by English Heritage, the Church of England, and the Ministry of Justice. The function of the panel was to provide advice to professionals on the treatment of archaeological remains from Christian [*sic*] burial grounds. In 2009 English Heritage, the Church of England and the Ministry of Justice, as the three organisations with statutory responsibilities for archaeological burials in England, consulted on a proposal to wind up APACBE, and replace it with a new advisory panel covering *all* burials excavated from archaeological sites in England. The consultation responses received were overwhelmingly in support of this proposal. The new panel, the Advisory Panel on the Archaeology of Burials in England (APABE), held its inaugural meeting in 2010. The panel comprises professionals including archaeologists, osteologists and museum staff. With the exception of representatives from English Heritage, the Church of England and the Ministry of Justice, members are selected for their own personal background and experience rather than as representatives of an organisation. The remit of the panel includes the provision of free casework advice on scientific, legal, ethical and other matters, to professionals who deal with archaeological human remains; support for those involved with human remains in interpreting relevant guidance documents (for example, DCMS, 2005; Mays, 2005) and the provision of new guidance where necessary. To date this includes a guidance note on the archaeology of

burial vaults (ADCA, 2010) and a policy paper on the destructive sampling of human remains (Mays et al., 2013). At the time of writing a guidance note on sampling large cemeteries (Mays et al., forthcoming) is going through a consultation process and will shortly be published. The guidance notes on the archaeology of burial vaults and sampling of large cemeteries are of great importance to the study of post-medieval burial and both are discussed in some detail below.

3.4.2 Archaeology of Burial Vaults (ADCA 2010)

While the existence and significance of medieval burial vaults is acknowledged, the ADCA guidance concentrates on vaults from the period c 1650 to 1900. There is now a general acceptance that in legal terms the archaeology of human remains begins 100 years before the present (Human Tissue Act, 2004; Human Tissue Act (Scotland), 2006). However, situations do quite regularly arise where remains less than 100 years old are encountered by archaeologists. Examples include the former Unitarian Chapel and burial ground at Swinton, Greater Manchester (Gibson 2014, pp. 15-16). Oxford Archaeology was involved in the exhumation of 325 burials, a project which was carried out in partnership with an exhumation company, Burial Ground Services. In accordance with the project brief, 205 were taken for immediate reburial either because they post-dated 1900 or living relatives had requested immediate reburial. The remainder were archaeologically excavated and full osteological recording is underway.

In contrast to earlier periods, for post-medieval human remains there are no well-developed archaeological research agendas (national or regional). The authors emphasise the fact that this is a separate sub-discipline of archaeology with specific difficulties and distinct research themes. Difficulties include emotional response, heightened sensitivities (due to the presence of named individuals and the recent date of remains) and hazardous working conditions (confined spaces, the weight of lead coffins and the preservation of soft tissue). These require detailed planning as early as possible, with risk assessments identified as a key element. The ADCA guidelines (2010) state plainly that awareness needs to be raised of the value of vault research, especially among custodians, so there is a presumption of access and analysis when opportunities arise and, equally, that archaeologists and historians need to be precise about likely outcomes and financial implications (ADCA 2010, 4).

There is a section on issues, legislation and good practice (ADCA 2010, 5). Of particular relevance is the reference to a reluctance on the part of parishes or owners of private land to allow the opening of coffins which are still substantially intact, as it is seen as unnecessary and disrespectful. The authors advocate a clearly-staged programme of work backed by a justifiable research strategy which demonstrates to the developer that such work is in the public interest.

The section on archaeological excavation and recording of vaults is brief but useful. A key factor influencing the level of data recovery from vaults is who takes charge of the clearance (see St Pancras above). At best an exhumation contractor will make a record of nameplates, a rough location and number of coffins removed⁴. The process of removal will ultimately cause damage and the loss of valuable data (ADCA 2010, p. 6). The authors recommend that vault excavation should involve several kinds of archaeological recording, including:

- Documentary analysis of all available records relating to the vault prior to fieldwork
- Standing building recording of the vault (see English Heritage, 2006)
- Wooden coffin recording. These can be overlooked and are often fragile and damaged
- Lead coffin recording is the norm for most vaults, before re-interment unopened
- Burial shrouds, clothes and interior fittings of coffins are often recovered from split and damaged coffins in vaults and should also be recorded

Research priorities are defined under a range of headings and subheadings: use of vaults (peopling of vaults, historical demography, medical history, generalist history); human osteology (demography, social standing, living environment, industrialisation, disease and post-mortem practices, socio-economic status, scientific research) (ADCA 2010, pp. 7-10). Carefully considered research themes are needed to ensure that archaeological projects are tightly focussed and proportionate (2010, p.7).

3.4.3 Sampling Large Burial Grounds

At the time of writing a draft paper on sampling large burial grounds has been produced by members of APABE (Mays et al., forthcoming) and is going through a consultation process. All the information in this section derives from that document. The guidance note is primarily directed at those who will be involved with decision-making at any stage of a project where large numbers of burials are to be disinterred. It is designed to assist with establishing a suitable approach to their excavation in the context of their significance and the value of the information contained within them. The document is aimed at large burial grounds regardless of archaeological period. However, because most large burial grounds are post-medieval in date, this document is likely to be pertinent most often for post-medieval burial grounds. The position taken in the guidance is that the study of post-medieval burial grounds is

⁴ At St Bartholomew's, St Luke's and St George's preliminary discussion allowed for the clear definition of a working system whereby the requirements of both the archaeologists and the exhumation contractors could be accommodated.

potentially of no less value than the analysis of burials from earlier periods, and that the significance of large archaeological assemblages will often be multi-disciplinary and can be considerable.

In some post-medieval cemeteries the number of burials likely to be affected by development may be extremely large – in the order of tens of thousands. This begs the question of whether it is reasonable for the developer to pay for full excavation and analysis of every burial threatened or whether, instead, some sort of sampling strategy is justified. Although it is argued that the basic premise should be that all burials threatened by a development should be fully excavated and analysed, it is also acknowledged that costs and logistical difficulties may mean that sampling is appropriate in some cases (Mays et al., forthcoming, pp. 2-3). In general terms a large assemblage has greater research value than a small one and the value of the former is discussed in some detail (forthcoming, pp. 3-6).

Logistical and financial considerations are brought into sharp relief by the following statement:

‘Calculating at 2014 rates, and using a generally accepted formula (Mays, 2005, p.44), post-ex-cavation analysis of 15,000-20,000 well-preserved skeletons is likely to cost about £2 million, with excavation, publication and archiving costs on top of this. In addition, the excavation, study and long- or short-term storage of skeletal assemblages of this size pose significant logistical problems.’ (Mays et al., forthcoming, p. 6).

Nonetheless, it is argued, and rightly, that such practicalities cannot be resolved by recording skeletons on site and rapidly reburialing them as working conditions are inadequate, results cannot be checked and material is not available to future researchers. Rapid scanning is also inappropriate (see St Nicholas and St Luke’s above) as all four fields of osteological data (skeletal inventory, demographic data, normal variation (metric and non-metric) and pathology data) are fundamental to an adequate osteological report (Mays et al., 2002). Those desiring to pursue a strategy whereby only a sub-sample of burials impacted by a development is excavated archaeologically and/or scientifically studied, need to justify it rigorously on a site by site basis (Mays et al., forthcoming, p.7). Projects should involve desk-based assessments and, if appropriate, evaluation at an early stage in the process.

The authors provide options for sampling which are summarised here. Sampling can be undertaken at the excavation stage (only a subset of the total burials impacted by the development are archaeologically excavated and recovered) or at the post-ex-cavation phase (all burials affected by the development are archaeologically excavated but only a sub-sample are selected at the assessment phase for subsequent analysis). In some cases, a combination of both might be used. Both have their advantages. If sampling occurs at the excavation stage, money will be saved and it is more efficient as all the burials excavated are likely to be analysed. One or more areas could be set aside for full archaeological excavation and recovery of remains, the rest being cleared by an exhumation company (St Pancras) but this can lead to problems

of interpretation (there may phasing or zoning by chronological phase). Burials could be selected during excavation according to archaeological factors or the preservation or completeness of remains. For example, only skeletons above some threshold of completeness (for example 25% of the skeleton present) could be selected for further processing and post-excavation study.

It is suggested that selection of burials at the post-excavation phase is more straightforward and often preferable because the stratigraphic sequence will have been established, the full size of the assemblage will be known, and one can readily select burials on the basis of preservation/completeness or archaeological interest. In this way an optimal sampling strategy can more easily be implemented than if one attempts to make sampling decisions on site. Such sampling can easily occur at the post-excavation assessment phase. The selection can be random (no bias but unable to target more osteologically or archaeologically-useful burials), based on osteological information content (preservation and completeness), or based on osteological features of interest (certain pathologies, demographic sub-groups). But selection by demographic subgroup would prevent analysis of the demographic profile of the population; selection according to the presence of pathologies would preclude epidemiological studies of disease frequency, and is not recommended); or selection according to archaeological aspects (such as date, phase, presence of coffin or vault). However, the latter will bias the sample towards the wealthier members of the population, while coffin plates are osteologically useful for testing techniques for determining sex, age at death and other aspects.

3.4.4 Research Agendas

It is beyond the scope of this brief review to consider research agendas for the study of post-medieval burial in detail so I will conclude with some brief comments on the wider significance of some elements of the resource under a number of sub-headings.

Funerary architecture

Gravestones are one of the most obvious categories of artefact relating to post-medieval funerary activity. Recent work (Tarlow, 1999; Mytum, 2002) has focussed on how shapes, iconography and text have changed over time. Some gravestones will remain *in situ* while others will have been moved during graveyard re-ordering so, for example, it cannot be assumed that an absence of above-ground memorials equates with the presence of poor parishioners who could not afford to purchase them. Monuments can be linked to particular families and often provide information on place of residence, occupation and social position which it may in turn be possible to link with specific design preferences. Other significant funerary architecture includes table tombs, mort safes, mort houses and ledger stones.

Graveyard organisation and management

There is huge scope for discovering more about how different graveyards and crypts were organised and managed over time. Are there concentrations within certain areas of a graveyard, for example, children (this was demonstrated at New Bunhills), poorer parishioners, wealthier parishioners or evidence of family burial plots? Where coffin stacks are revealed do the stacks contain families or unrelated individuals? The vaults at St George's, Bloomsbury, demonstrated that the latter was often the case (Boston et al., 2009)

Coffin construction

The recording of coffins and their associated fittings can contribute to our understanding of the history and development of funeral trends. The team at Oxford Archaeology have been working on a typology of coffin fittings which draws on data from burial grounds and crypts from across the country. The recording of biographical data from coffinplate inscriptions can contribute to the understanding of the demography of a given population. Elements of coffin construction such as form, materials, motifs, decoration, fittings, pillows, mattresses and floral wreaths⁵ can all be significant indicators of the social standing, beliefs and identity of an individual. The burial paraphernalia of the wealthy is far better understood than that of the less privileged.

Documentary research

There is huge scope for documentary research, both independent of and linked to osteological data. Inscriptions on gravestones and burial registers are obvious starting points, though undocumented interments are by no means unheard of.

History of medicine

A recent study of post-medieval burial devoted a chapter to the use of the dead for medical research (Cherryson et al., 2012). In the 18th and 19th centuries there was an increasing need for corpses that could be dissected by medical students, and this clearly relates to the history of the development of the medical profession. A named individual from St Luke's, Islington exhibited evidence for a malignant neoplasm and a horizontal craniotomy which had been performed at his death in 1842 (Boston et al., 2005, 180, 233, 251, pl. 5.2). He was not alone: a further three individuals had been subjected to autopsy for less obvious reasons. All four were buried within the crypt in lead-lined coffins and were unlikely to have been executed felons, nor would they have died on the parish in poverty. It is conceivable that their autopsies were performed on the sly. The study of further hospital populations such as those from Greenwich (Boston et al., 2008), Haslar in Gosport (Shortland et al., 2008) and the Radcliffe Infirmary in

⁵ Floral tributes in the form of wreaths along with herbs including lavender and rosemary were found within coffins at St Nicholas, Sevenoaks.

Oxford (Gibson 2014, p. 16) is to be strongly recommended. Assessment of the human remains from the Radcliffe Infirmary has identified evidence for medical intervention (for example, trepanation) and post-mortem investigation (for example, craniotomies) but virtually no evidence for anatomisation and dissection. The reason for this is not yet clear.

Social stratification and population movement

As I commented above, much of the work on post-medieval burial grounds has focussed on London and the south-east. So, unsurprisingly there has been limited work on working class populations outside of London. Funerary practices of the post-medieval period and particularly of the Industrial Revolution in the north of England are poorly understood (Brennand, 2006; 2007). More work on such burial groups could potentially provide information on the effects of rapid industrialisation leading to increased urbanisation and population growth combined with inadequate public health measures, poor air and water quality and dangerous working conditions. Further work is also required on rural communities of the post-medieval period. It has been argued that well-documented post-medieval burial groups would make ideal test cases for the analyses of isotopes as indicators of geographical mobility (Henderson 2008, p. 41).

3.5 Final Thoughts

With the exception of some of the smaller post-medieval burial grounds (for example McCarthy et al., 2012) the vast majority of projects now involve some degree of partnership between professional archaeologists and commercial exhumation companies. This can make sense logistically. Oxford Archaeology has worked as a sub-contractor to an exhumation contractor on a number of projects. Such an arrangement can work successfully according to a detailed project brief with clearly defined working practices which are in place from the outset. This need for detailed project planning at a very early stage has recently been stressed by other authors (ADCA 2010, p. 10; Mays et al., forthcoming, p. 7).

Full recording and excavation of every substantial post-medieval burial ground and crypt is a desirable option but not a realistic one. The skeletal assemblage from St Nicholas was reburied in the churchyard, but the artefacts and paper archive remain in storage at Oxford Archaeology and the results of the work have never been fully published. A full report on St Luke's was produced, and while it was never formally published it is available to download. All the skeletal material and the coffin furniture from both St Luke's and St George's have also been reburied. It has rightly been stated (ADCA, 2010, p. 6) that although a number of vaults have been 'dug', very few have made material available to osteologists and other researchers with some exceptions, for example, St Marylebone, Westminster (Miles et al., 2008).

Ecclesiastical authorities are likely to be firm in terms of specifying a timetable for re-interment, or at least imposing stringent conditions for long-term curation elsewhere (ADCA, 2010, p. 5). The latter has clear financial implications. It is debatable whether the kind of development carried out at St Nicholas would now take place. Within the Faculty system used by the Church of England, any changes to the consecrated space of a church and its churchyard require a Statement of Significance to be prepared (Mays et al., forthcoming, p. 1). The potential loss of significance needs to be carefully balanced against the social and economic benefits of development.

The paragraph below which refers specifically to post-medieval vaults is equally applicable to post-medieval burial grounds and is a fitting conclusion to this brief personal review.

‘Vaults and their contents represent a key component of community heritage; they are the repository of former human beings, former parishioners; they are part of the extant places of worship, and they are significant historical, demographic and archaeological resources capable of making very real additions to our knowledge of past cultural, religious and demographic experience. If there is an overriding reason to empty them [vaults] of their contents, it is important to plan a coherent, meaningful and proportionate response to this to help preserve the knowledge and heritage and other significance for current and future generations. This can be done sensitively and without overwhelming cost through good forward planning and fully justified objectives.’ (ADCA, 2010, p. 10).

Huge advances have been made in the field of post-medieval burial archaeology over the last 30 years. I would certainly approach each of the projects I was involved with in a very different way now and I would like to think that I have a clearer understanding of the potential of the resource and the most beneficial archaeological approaches. The recently published guidance (ADCA, 2010) and the soon-to-be published guidance (Mays et al., forthcoming) will make an invaluable contribution to our approaches in the future.

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