



Photo: Oxford Archaeology

INSIGHT INTO EXHUMATION

by Michael Gill, of Rowland Brothers Exhumation

Britain is a small Island, in comparison with, say, Australia. And yet we have a sizable population, in comparison with, say, Easter Island.

For most of the last two thousand years that population has buried its dead within the bounds of this small island. Only within the last hundred, with the acceptance of cremation, has this sad demand for island space let up.

Hardly surprising then that any major construction project, such as Cross Rail or HS2, will inevitably encounter Human Remains, at some stage, interred en-route.

Church Councillors planning developments within the burial grounds will expect to have to deal with exhumation as part of the project. Project Managers on un-consecrated ground may not. Either way, should it happen, someone has to deal with it.

Dealing with it has, for many years, meant industrial scale exhumation or even 'Capping' - covering the

burial area and, effectively, entombing the remains. Neither method stands up to much public scrutiny & articles expressing concern over HS2 have hit headlines in local press at least. Which is where Rowland Brothers Exhumation Services come in.

Thirty Five years ago Tony Rowland decided to create a separate department within his Croydon based family business of Rowland Brothers Funeral Directors –this new department was to deal with repatriation, a sector of funeral services starting to become more common as Britain become more diversified and travel abroad more affordable. The new department became so successful that Rowland Brothers are now known throughout the industry as an international funeral company.

Now Steve Rowland, Tony's son and Managing Director of Rowland Brothers Ltd has set out to do the same for exhumations. Not by competing with existing specialist companies but by doing something different.

Recognising the concern being shown over HS2 and the A63 extension in Hull, Steve has embarked on a program of training and development that aims to allay fears over the methods employed by funeral operatives on mass exhumations. He has tasked David Collins and Michael Gill, Special Projects Manager at Rowland Brothers Exhumation Services to lead this development program.

Michael has thirty years' experience within the funeral profession, specialising in repatriation and having been involved since the late 1990's with the repatriation of services personnel on behalf of the MOD. He has deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan & Kosovo as well as taking part in many of the cortege's passing through Royal Wootton Bassett.

David is a veteran of over 100 individual exhumation services but is the first to admit that every exhumation is different.

"I was called to carry out the exhumation of a deceased person from Chapel Catacombs – not unusual in itself, only, the records showed the catacomb to be empty. The Cemetery Superintendent had opened the vault to find a coffin no one expect to be there! As we carried out the

removal we had no idea what we were dealing with, poor record keeping or something more sinister." –

David Collins.

Now Michael & David have to take Rowland Brothers Exhumation team to a new level of expertise.

Health & Safety training, Risk Assessments & Method Statements developed by IOSH accredited specialists and personal protective equipment for all members of the exhumation team was just the start. Now the team have personal tuition from the real experts – Oxford Archaeology.

In October 2014 the six members of Rowlands who make up the two exhumation teams visited Oxford Archaeology for an intense course on Osteoarchaeology. The course, commissioned privately by Rowland Brothers, was developed and presented by Dr Louise Loe PhD, Head of Heritage Burial Services and colleague Helen Webb MSc, Osteoarchaeologist.

Between them Dr Loe and Helen Webb have overseen numerous archaeological surveys and

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excavations, both in the UK and abroad, working with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission on the exhumation and identification of soldiers of the First World War located in Fromelles, Northern France and, closer to home, at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford.

"I don't see us becoming Archaeologist's or anywhere near" says Rowland Brothers Special Projects Manager Michael Gill who planned the course with Dr Loe. 'But it will hopefully give us an insight into the Archaeologist's work and start a relationship that could save a lot of time once we are working together on project sites."

The morning was spent in the classroom, Dr Loe introducing the team members to an overview of the legal, ethical and practical aspects of mass exhumation from an academic point of view. Particular emphasis was placed on the professional bodies that oversee standards in the field, something familiar to members of the NAFD.

"Even though OA have the protection of being perceived as an academic institution as opposed to Rowlands being purely commercial, their problems seem very familiar – whichever way you approach the exercise, you have to have respect for the deceased" –

Michael Gill.

Project Managers have been obliged to co-operate with Archaeologist's, Heritage organisations and, when necessary, Funeral Directors since PPG16 (Planning Policy Guidance 16: Archaeology and Planning) applied the 'polluter pays' principle to disturbance of archaeological remains in 1990.

This means the construction companies have a duty of care over the deceased encountered during works, as do the funeral staff and Archaeologist's. The Archaeology takes precedence and is now a required lead into any development encountering or even expecting to encounter artefacts of any historical or cultural interest.

Archaeologist's, however, also have a duty to record any information that could be lost during moving the remains, in particular the exact location and attitude of the deceased, a task made more simple and yet unbelievably accurate using the latest computer and GPS technology. Specially commissioned programs such as 'Crossbones' have been developed to enable computer generated 3D views of an excavated area accurate to within 20cm – the width of your hand. *"Although this level of scrutiny is not required for Funeral purposes, I can't help thinking what would the deceased have thought if told their remains would one day be*

located and mapped by orbiting satellites?" –

Michael Gill.

Crossbones enabled OA to make meaningful analysis of a Roman mass grave containing around 91 skeletons, the remains being completely entangled in both horizontal & vertical planes. A copy of Crossbones can be downloaded at <http://burials.thehumanjourney.net/>

Despite this technology however, it seemed somehow reassuring that finds are also recorded the old fashioned way, with marker post's and in-situ photographs, although there have been stories of scallywags moving the marker posts overnight to confuse the issue come the morning.

Now, these efforts to record and save information and artefacts is all very well but, the fact remains we are looking at construction sites – commercial projects and the single most important task is the removal of the remains. So we moved on to the most cogent part of the course, excavation techniques.

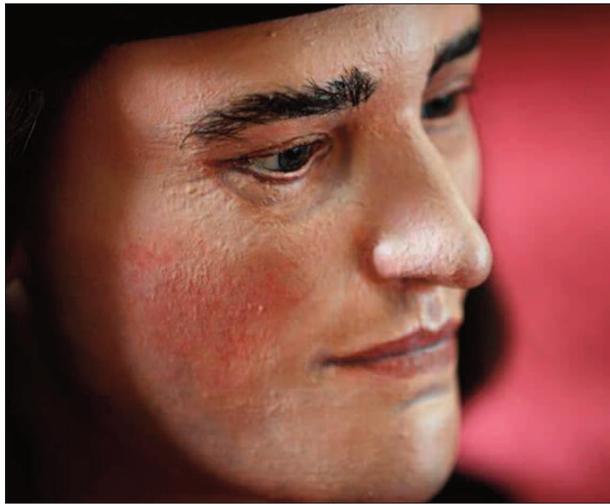
"This is the important part as far as I am concerned. We need to understand how Archaeologist's carry out this part of their work so that we can adopt, as far as practical, their methods and also help us dovetail our operations with those of the Archaeologist." –

Michael Gill.

Helen Webb took team members through the delicate process of removing the remains from the ground, a process heavily reliant on ground conditions – as Funeral Directors will be all too aware. The soil type makes such a difference that excavation of a single individual can vary from an hours work to a whole day.

A consistent level of excavation, continuous photographic recording and orientation markings making this a time consuming process. Not on the agenda for Funeral Operatives but good to understand, this meticulous attention to detail can only help RBE staff carry out their own duties as well as giving them an insight into the timescale of the academics'. If the Archaeologists' are taking their time over their work, then at least we know why.

Helen was clearly passionate about her work particularly when the subject of Richard III arose. Although not directly involved with the task of exhuming the monarch from his burial site in Leicester, Helen had, through pure professional interest, seen the TV documentary and was able to use the methods shown during the high profile



Visualisation of Richard III

exhumation to demonstrate differing techniques used throughout the profession.

As you would expect excavating the initial layers of earth can be completed using mechanical plant machinery (see Time team – last mention of the program) and continuing with smaller and smaller implements until you are left only with your hands. Before lifting the remains, records including photographs, are taken, and soil samples are also collected. These samples are from particular areas around the hands, spine and feet – areas where the smallest of bones may be missed during the visual exploration, and examined later in more comfortable surroundings.

Examination of those soil samples and, indeed, of the entire remains, now collated and secured in specially designed artefact boxes, takes place indoors either in specially constructed accommodation on-site or at Head Office in Oxford. The academic analysis and resulting information gained since PPG16 has changed many people's perception of Post Medieval Burial Sites. It used to be considered, amongst Archaeologists, that such burials were 'all the same'. Now it seems there is more to be learned than originally thought and, being so much more recent, can be of more relevance to our lives today.

Putting this new information into some sort of chronological order (Archaeologist's being Archaeologists) needed some form of dating criteria and this was found in the Coffin and its accoutrements. Handles, plates and other coffin fixtures have been identified, recorded and illustrated in detail so that they can now be used in the way pottery is used for dating earlier excavations.



Dr Louise Loe PhD, Head of Heritage Burial Services

The analysis of remains can reveal much about ordinary life over the last few hundred years, but it can also resolve some more high profile questions. Returning to the remains of Richard III, having confirmed identity using DNA analysis of a distant, living ancestor, researchers were finally able to consider the facts relating to his alleged deformity.

Shakespeare described Richard III as a 'poisonous bunch-back'd toad' not pleasant and not quite accurate. He was found to suffer from Scoliosis – a curvature of the spine, still discernible after more than 500 years in his grave. The detail of the analytical procedure used to confirm this diagnosis and how this can be discerned from the skeletal remains may well have led Rowlands team members into the realms of serious academia. Thankfully, it actually took everyone upstairs – from the classroom to the real thing.

"Laid out in front of us were two skeletons, one real, one articulated with wire, as you would expect in an Anatomy Lab. The real one sadly was that of a child. Small bones leading to tiny bones and, at the fingers tips, what could have been fragments but, in fact, were complete.

Having seen for ourselves the physical relationship of bones to bones we divided into three pairs and were presented with a collection of cardboard boxes, archives boxes, containing one whole skeleton per pair. And we

had to lay them out on tables using the artificial example as reference. Ben & Joe had the advantage here as they both covered bone structure as part of their college studies.

Once completed our task was to estimate the age & sex of the individual, and to identify indicators of health & disease. We did well considering. Ben & Joe were spot on, David & Robbo close, the remaining two Michaels' stymied by being asked to guess the sex of what was clearly the skeleton of a child. Even for experts this is problematic as the defining characteristics develop only later in life.

Dr Loe was able to demonstrate how far more could be learned when looking with a trained eye. Thankfully she kept the explanations and descriptions within the scope of non-academics' understanding, 'Diffuse Idiopathic Systemic Hyperostosis (DISH)' being mentioned only once." –

Michael Gill.

This completed the days' work and now RBE move on to the practical application of what has been learned, with field work to come, as and when

suitable projects arise. Today was just the beginning. "Over the years Rowland Brothers have carried out work of this nature a number of times, but not like this. Steve has invested heavily in order to meet the standards being set by Government and Public sentiment and we will probably have to keep coming back to learn more as the learning curve climbs steeper. I want to thank Dr Loe and Helen for putting this program together and look forward to working alongside them and their colleagues for years to come."

Michael Gill:

Finally, Dr Loe:

"The training day is a good first step towards achieving a seamless approach to burial projects that require archaeological and exhumation input." ■

Below; Staff at Oxford

