

An archaeological watching brief of the exhumation of the Jesuit Cemetery at Manresa House, Roehampton

Melissa Melikian

Introduction

This article summarises the results of an archaeological watching brief at Manresa House, formerly Parkstead House, Roehampton, SW17, conducted by AOC Archaeology Group on behalf of Lend Lease Ltd. The watching brief was carried out as a requirement of a condition attached to planning consent. The relocation of the cemetery to another area of the site was carried out in order to build academic, administrative and residential buildings for Whitelands College, University of Surrey, Roehampton. The exhumation of the Jesuit cemetery was carried out by Toop Exhumation Services Ltd. The cemetery, which covers approximately 289.5m², is centred at NGR TQ 22191 73612 (Fig.1). The site is accessed from Holybourne Avenue and is situated within land owned by Whitelands College.

The Jesuits

The Jesuits, or Society of Jesus, are a Roman Catholic religious order founded by Saint Ignatius Loyola in 1534 and confirmed by Pope Paul III in 1540. The Jesuits are noted for their educational, missionary, and charitable works and their object is the spread of the church by preaching and teaching. Education has been its chief activity almost from the outset, and it has made notable contributions to scholarship in both theology and the secular disciplines. Today there are about 250 Jesuits in Britain, and over 20,000 serving the Church worldwide in 112 nations on six continents.

Archaeological and historical background

There is some evidence for prehistoric activity in the area, particularly in the Palaeolithic period in the form of hand-axes and flint flakes.¹ There is a lack of Roman and Saxon evidence in the Roehampton area. During the medieval period Roehampton was established as a hamlet and by the end of the 14th century the settlement gained the name of 'Rokehampton' or 'Roughampton'.² During the post-medieval period an increased prosperity of the area resulted in the purchase and enclosure of the land by rich land-owners, who then built country houses and formal gardens. Manresa House was one such property and was constructed by the Earl of Bessborough in 1761. In 1861 the Society of Jesus bought the property and 42 acres of land to use as a retreat and training college. The first interment in the

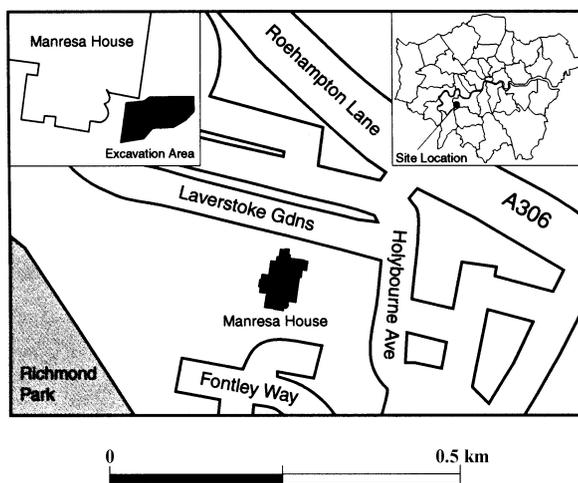


Fig. 1: site location

cemetery was recorded on 4th September 1867. The last Jesuit priest was interred in 1962, the year in which the Society sold the property to the London County Council. Since then, various educational establishments have occupied the buildings, but they have remained unoccupied in the last few years until the current refurbishment.

Methodology

During the watching brief, the funerary monuments, the coffin (fittings and furniture) and burial practice were recorded following standard practice.³ The exhumation was carried out by Toop Exhumation Services Ltd. with the assistance of Dr Susan Young as health advisor. The Jesuits had requested that no invasive techniques were performed on the material and as a result no osteological recording took place. Once each burial had been recorded the remains were reburied in another area of the site.

The tombstones

A total of 82 headstones were present below the topsoil, located in ten rows, on an east-west alignment. Each single inhumation or stack burial bar one was capped with a headstone. The grave of Fr. P. Widdowson, the last burial to take place in the cemetery, had no headstone. It is likely this burial was intended as the first of a stack burial and a tombstone would have been placed on the burial at a later date when the additional burials had taken place. All of the headstones were limestone and of the ringed cross design. The majority were step-shouldered with a ringed cross incorporated into the top. The tombstones generally lacked decoration. At the centre of the each ringed cross IHS was inscribed, this was occasionally interwoven. The IHS monogram is the abbreviation of the name of Jesus and was adopted by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his seal as general of the Society of Jesus and thus it became the emblem of the society.

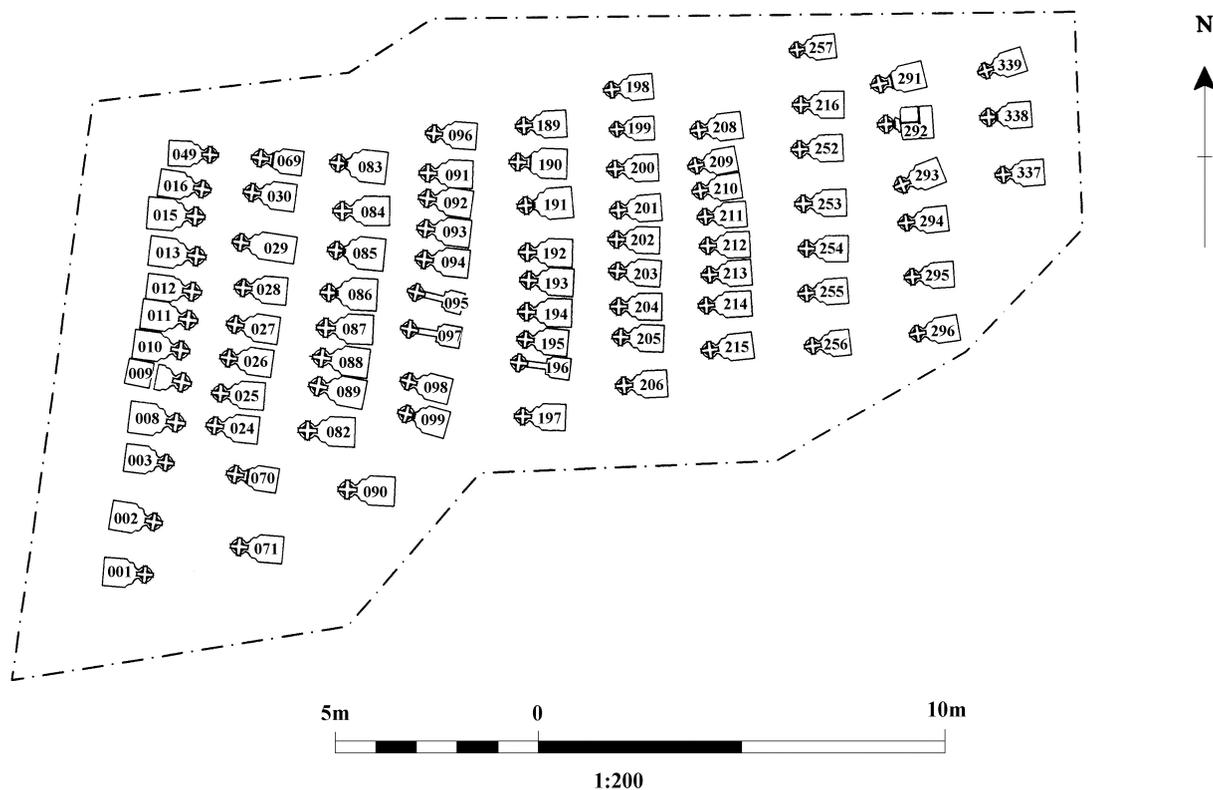


Fig. 2: the tombstones

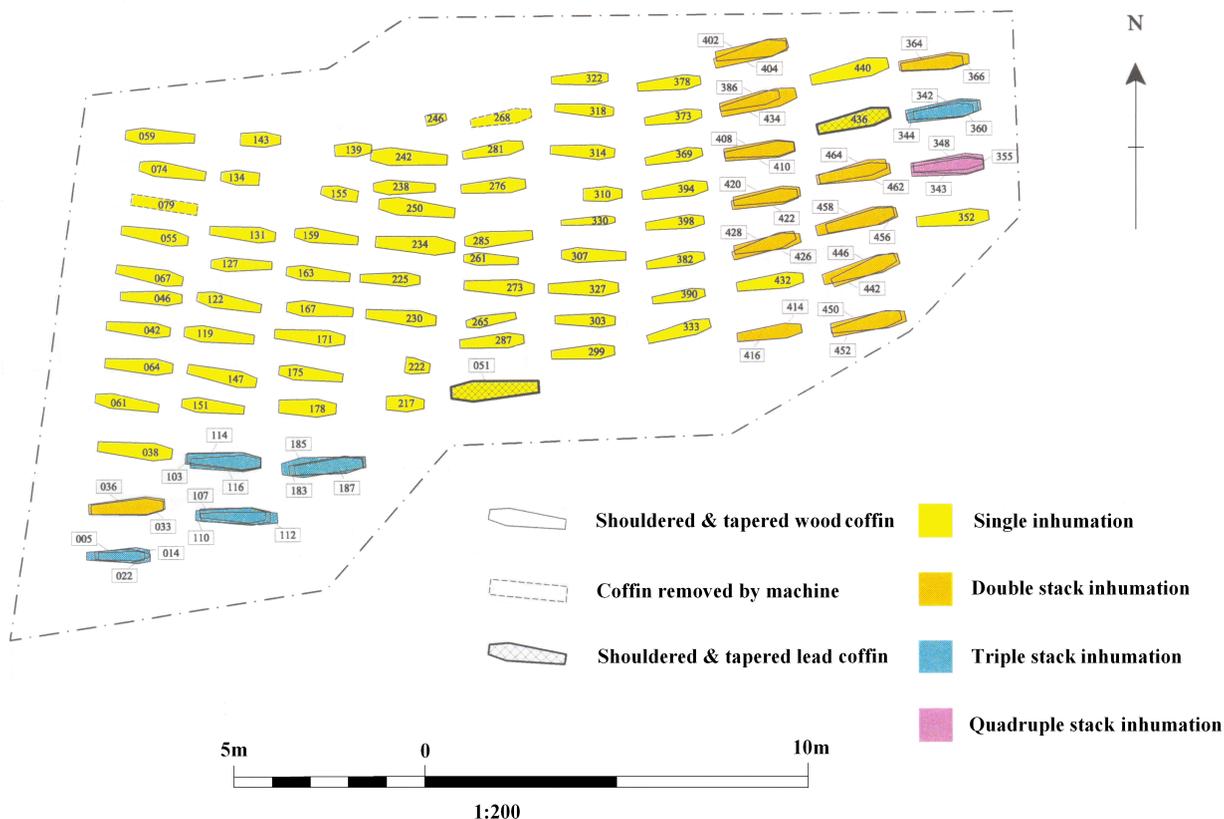


Fig. 3: the cemetery

The text panels on the tombstones were defined by incised and painted lines. For the majority, the text panel was located on the main section of the tombstone. The inscriptions on the tombstones were relatively formulaic and repetitive. These tended to consist of ‘*orate pro animabus*’ (pray for the souls), the name of the individual, his position in the Jesuit order, his date of birth (‘*natus*’), his date of death (‘*mortui*’ or ‘*obiit*’) and R.I.P. for ‘*requiescat in pace*’ or ‘may he rest in peace’. The names on the majority of tombstones were Latinised e.g. *Henricus* for Henry, *Carolus* for Charles. The following orders were encountered on the tombstones at Whitelands College:

Sacerdotis Societatis Jesu – Priest of the Society of Jesus

Coadjunctoris Temporalis S.J. – Brother (literally assistant in temporal world)

Scholastici S.J. – An individual in training to be ordained (literally student)

The assemblage at Whitelands College consisted of 73 ordained priests (five of whom were

novices), 26 brothers, four priests in training and five had no information present.

Coffin and coffin fittings

A total of 108 coffins were recorded (Fig. 3). All the coffins were shouldered and tapered and all but two of these were constructed of wood; the two remaining coffins were lead. Both of these lead coffins had inner and outer wood coffins. Of the lead coffins, one was associated with Archbishop Goodier and this would be expected for such a high status individual. Three of the wooden coffins were double layered, consisting of an inner and outer wooden coffin. The majority of the wooden coffins were lined with tar and contained packing material that consisted of either sawdust or newspaper. One coffin contained limestone/chalk packing and another contained horse hair that had survived from the coffin padding.

Many of the coffins had associated coffin furniture that consisted of grips and grip-plates, crucifixes and coffin/breast-plates. Associated

coffin/breast-plates were found in 47% of the burials. These were either in the form of a cross or a rectangular or shield-shaped panel. The plates were made of lead, iron, or copper alloy. The lead and iron plates were often heavily corroded and in a poor state of preservation. Only nine coffin plates were legible and were recorded in full.

Burial practice

As is the practice in Christian cemeteries, all 108 individuals were buried in coffins on an east-west alignment but the orientation of the individual in the grave occasionally differed. The majority (80%) of individuals were orientated with the head to the east and 18% were orientated with the head to the west. The deepest burial was encountered at a depth of 34.16m OD, some 3.24m below the ground height at the time of the watching brief, which had not differed greatly from that at the time of the burial. Individuals were buried either in single inhumations or stack burials containing two, three, or four coffins. A total of 60% (65) of individuals were buried in single inhumations. There were twelve double stack burials (24 individuals), five triple stacks (15 individuals) and one quadruple stack (four individuals). There appears to be a correlation between the stack burials and the more recent burials. This is likely to be due to the fact that the land was at a premium or may be related to the growth of the college at that time.

All individuals were buried supine in the coffin with their legs extended and their arms either extended by the sides or crossed on the torso. Where material had survived, (64% of individuals), individuals were buried clothed in their vestments rather than in a shroud. Clerical collars were often visible. These vestments appeared to be quite ornate with embroidery and in two cases gold thread had survived. Individuals (32%) were often buried with a rosary or crucifix. The rosary was most commonly wooden or occasionally plastic. The crucifix was

occasionally copper alloy or a copper-alloy Christ on a wooden cross. These were located either around the neck, in the hands or placed on the torso. The crucifix of Archbishop Goodier was particularly ornate and on a metal chain that was probably silver.

The dead

Soft tissue was present in twelve individuals. Hair and finger nails were also relatively common. This good preservation was due to the recent nature of the burials and the fact that a number were waterlogged, which slows decomposition. Although a high number displayed good preservation, some 36% were in poor condition (the bone was degraded and friable). Largely, this appears to be due to compression of the soil and coffin lid collapse. Often coffins were compressed to a depth of 0.10m–0.20m. Dentures were found in seven instances.

Conclusions

A total of 108 individuals were interred at the Jesuit cemetery at Whitelands College. The first interment was on 4th September 1867 and the last was on 29th June 1962. The cemetery was in use for some 95 years. The people who were buried at the site consisted of 73 ordained priests, 26 brothers and four priests in training. Included in the ordained group were Archbishop Alban Goodier and Bishop Charles Gordon.

Acknowledgements

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1. 'Whitelands College. An Archaeological Appraisal of Manresa House, Roehampton, London Borough of Wandsworth'. Ove Arup & Partners Ltd. October 2002.

2. *Ibid.*

3. 'Whitelands College (Manresa House), Roehampton, London Borough of Wandsworth. Archaeological Watching Brief Written Scheme of Investigation'. AOC Archaeology Group (2003).