

# Archaeological findings at the site of the St Pancras Burial Ground and its vicinity

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## Introduction

On 14 November 2007 St Pancras International was opened as the new London railway terminus for 'High Speed 1', the culmination of a redevelopment that included archaeological work on aspects of London's industrial heritage and one of its most important post-medieval burial grounds. As part of the work Gifford were commissioned by Rail Link Engineering (RLE) on behalf of Union Railways (North) Limited to undertake an archaeological watching brief at St Pancras Terminus and King's Cross Lands between December 2001 and May 2004. Archaeological observations were made across the construction site (Fig. 1) and included monitoring of exhumation works within the historic burial ground of St Pancras Old Church in 2002. In addition to the watching brief, part of the burial ground was the subject of controlled archaeological excavation in October and November 2002; a revised programme of coffin surveying and selected exhumation for osteological study took place between January and July 2003.

This paper has two purposes: (1) to describe briefly the watching brief discoveries relating to London's suburban and industrial development, (2) to summarise the findings related to the St Pancras Burial Ground, which will be reported on in detail in a forthcoming archaeological monograph.<sup>1</sup> The site archive is available for consultation in the LAARC under site code YKW01.<sup>2</sup>

## Archaeological and historical background

The natural topography of the site can be partially reconstructed from geotechnical borehole data and observations of alluvium during ground reduction. The Fleet River runs along the line of Pancras Road, with minor tributaries such as the Brill lying in the area now covered by St Pancras

International and King's Cross Station. St Pancras Old Church may have been sited on a promontory overlooking the confluence of the Fleet and the Brill.

Three medieval settlements existed in the vicinity – St Pancras village and the hamlets of Brill and Battle Bridge – and the rural character of the area remained largely undisturbed until the building of the New Road from Paddington to Islington in 1756. Maps chart the progressive envelopment of the site by urban expansion, culminating in industrial colonisation associated with the opening of the Grand Union (Regent's) Canal in 1820 (Fig. 2). Development of railway termini at King's Cross and St Pancras followed in 1851–2 and 1863–8 respectively. Agar Town, a neighbourhood of low-quality housing started in 1841, was destroyed by construction of the St Pancras station approaches. The canal interchange was an integral part of the mid-19th-century goods yards north of Kings Cross Station. At the time of the opening of St Pancras Station, the arched Barlow train shed was the largest single-span roof in the world, and the extensive St Pancras Station undercroft was purpose-built to house barrels of Burton beer brought to London by rail.

## St Pancras International Station and the King's Cross Lands

Aside from the cemetery itself, the archaeological evidence is related to the industrial heritage of the area, predominantly structures associated with the Midland Railway and the Regent's Canal.

Redeposited clay recorded to the south of the Regent's Canal, at the eastern end of Goodsway, was probably associated with the construction of the waterway. At the western end of Goodsway, excavation revealed foundations of brick buildings. This area was open ground for much of the 19th century<sup>3</sup> but buildings had appeared by

1862<sup>4</sup> at the junction of Wharf Road and Cambridge Street, including a stable block identified on the 1871 Ordnance Survey map. Warehouses and buildings related to use of the canal formed part of the development by 1894.<sup>5</sup>

Pottery from the excavations at Goodsway, dated to the second quarter of the 19th century, was probably either dumped from elsewhere in London or contained in accumulated rubbish from dust heaps and backyard middens, possibly from nearby Agar Town. It is not interpreted as a material marker of poverty, as it included wares such as willow pattern crockery, used to set the tables of a range of metropolitan households that crossed geographical and class boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

Observations in the Cheney Road and Battle Bridge Road area recorded 19th-century domestic buildings. A late 18th- or early 19th-century tin-glazed ointment pot came from a cellar here. The tin-glazed earthenware pottery industry had declined by 1800, with the last three London producers located at Vauxhall, Mortlake and Isleworth.

Kings Cross Goods Yard, located to the north of the station, was laid out by the Great Northern Railway Company (GNR) in the early 1850s. This vast complex was expanded in the 1850s and 1860s before being upgraded in the 1890s. Evidence of buildings was recorded at the north-east of the site, to the west of York Way. The area around the Midland Shed was developed by the GNR and became a potato market. Warehouses and roofed areas were added in 1864–5. A series of east-west aligned brick foundations recorded here are thought to relate to the Potato Market buildings and its gateway.

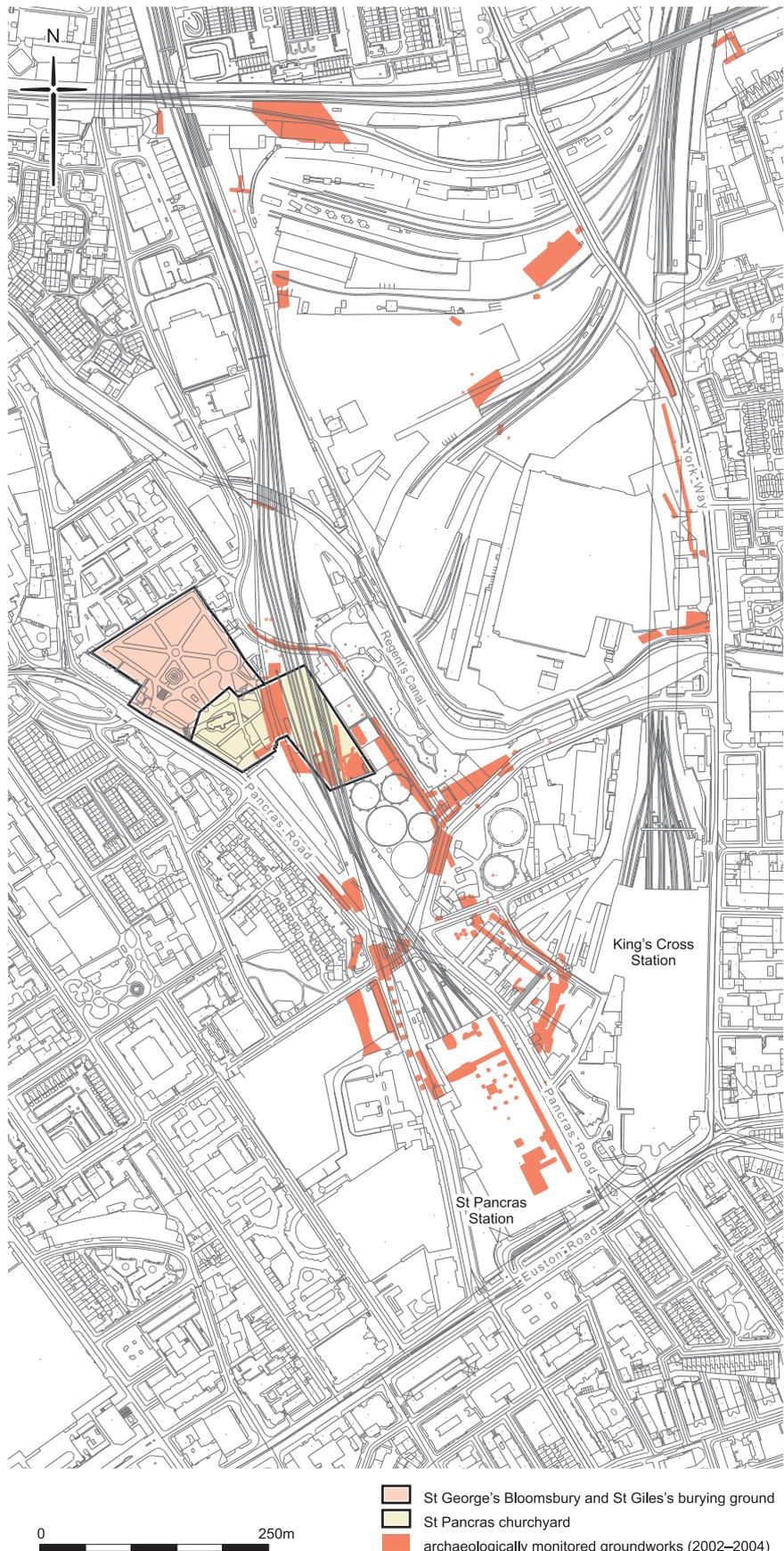
Structures pre-dating the Barlow train shed at St Pancras Station included a well or soakaway and a flue or drain. These features, truncated by the iron pillars supporting St Pancras Station, were probably associated with 18th- or

19th-century buildings that fronted onto Euston Road, Smith Place or Skinner Place. Other 19th-century buildings were recorded between King's Cross and St Pancras Stations. Sub-surface railway features included a section of the Hotel Curve Tunnel of the GNR, located next to the 1860s' Great Northern Hotel. Archaeological observations included the Midland Railway's crossing of the Regent's Canal, where embankments and revetments were recorded.

The location of Barlow's St Pancras Station was influenced by the topographical constraints of the site, particularly the Regent's Canal to the north. The decision to carry the railway over the canal meant that the level of the track in the station was c. 5m above ground level. The space below the track was initially to be filled with spoil from excavation of a railway tunnel connecting the new Midland Railway line with the existing Metropolitan underground railway. Recognition of the potential commercial value of the space led to a change of plan and construction of an undercroft covering c. 1.6 ha. The tracks and platforms were supported by wrought-iron girders and cast-iron columns, with most of the undercroft used for storing beer from Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire.

Three turntables, each measuring c. 8 m (26.2 ft) in diameter, were exposed during work in the undercroft (Fig. 3). Plans of the undercroft show the three turntables and their positions along the central axis of the building.<sup>7</sup> Tracks originally ran down the centre of the undercroft to its south end, crossing the three turntables along a 'central roadway', where wagons could be turned and sent along other tracks at the east or west.

A turntable for Midland locomotives (Fig. 4), measuring c. 19.10 m (62.6 ft) in diameter, was located to the north of the gasworks and is associated with development of the disused cemetery, which had been absorbed into the Goods Depot coal shoots west of the Regent's Canal. It is not shown on the 1871 and 1894 Ordnance Survey maps but does appear on the 1914 map. Documents show that St Pancras Station's first 60ft turntable was ordered on 14 July 1900 from Hemmingway Ltd.<sup>8</sup> The turntable's installation may be



**Fig. 1: plan showing the redevelopment area with the locations of archaeological observations**  
 Based upon Ordnance Survey large scale digital mapping with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office A/L – 100047146 © CROWN COPYRIGHT

contemporary with embankment works c. 1909 (see below). Other watching

brief work in the area recorded a section of the Fleet sewer.

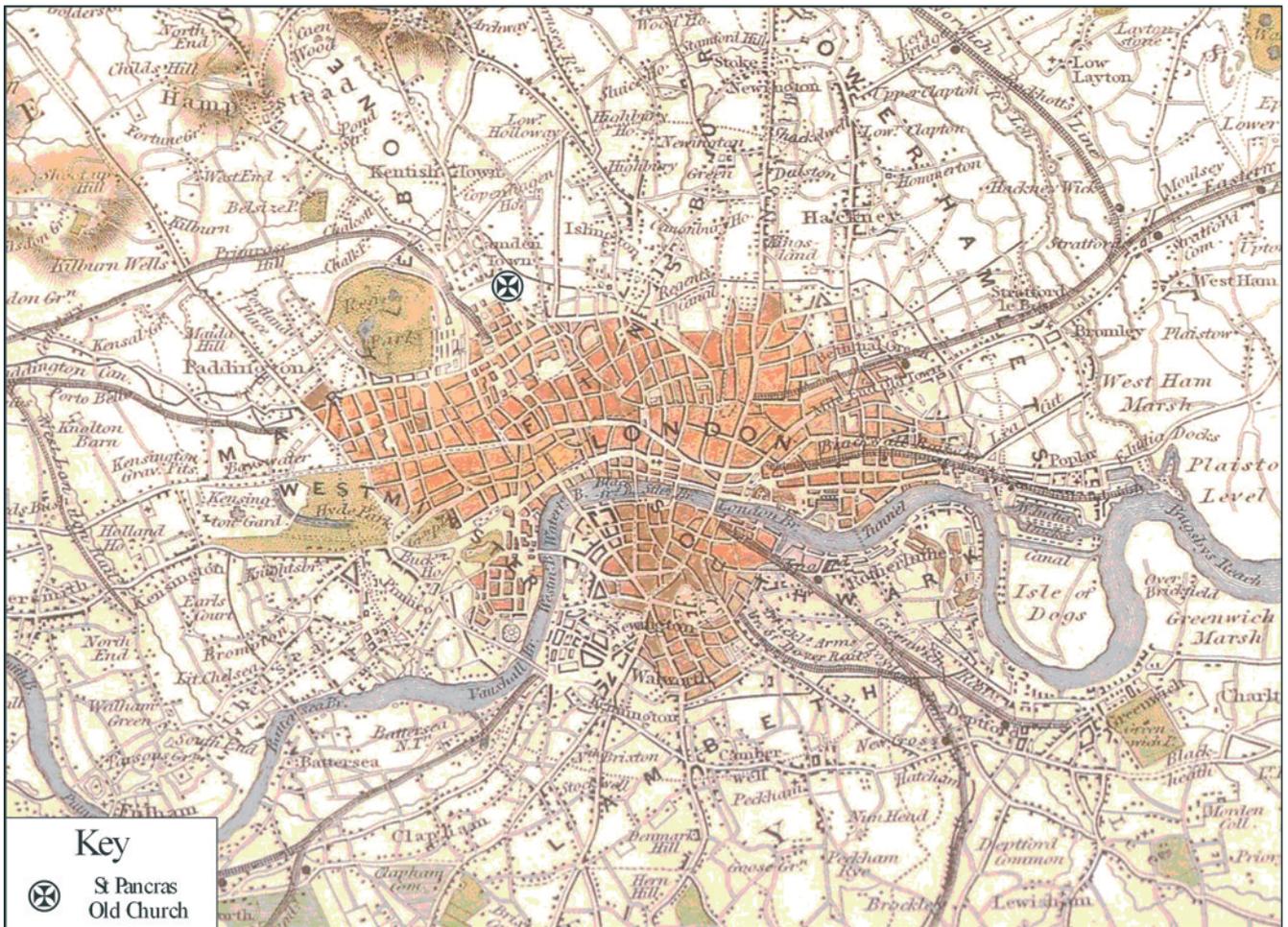


Fig. 2: Thomas Moule's map of London (1836) showing the location of St Pancras old church and early railway developments on the outskirts of the city, including the London and Birmingham Railway terminating at Euston (copyright: Gifford)

**St Pancras Old Church and Burial Ground**

**Historical background**

St Pancras Church is reputed to be the oldest surviving church in Britain, although there is no supporting evidence for this. In 1593 John Norden described the position of the church, 'which for the antiquitie thereof, it is thought not to yeeld to Paules in London'. The 1847 reconstruction of the medieval church revealed Roman tiles in the fabric of its tower and an inscribed altar stone dated to c. AD 625,<sup>9</sup> which might suggest an early 7th-century foundation. The original cemetery around the church appears to have been sub-circular, like many Late Saxon churchyards.

The churchyard was repeatedly extended onto surrounding land. By 1727 a curving ditch between the cemetery and the Pindle, an area of waste ground to the south-east, had been filled in and the 'Old Ground' expanded to include the 'New Church Yard'. Proposed extensions to the north in the 1770s and 1780s did not take

place. A 'New Burying Ground' was established to the east in 1792 and covered about two acres. The new extension was divided into the 'First Ground' at the north end, the 'Second Ground' in the middle, and the 'Third Ground' at the south (Fig. 5). The cemetery was closed in 1854, when burial in Central London was ended due to overcrowding. In 1875–77 the disused cemeteries of St Pancras and St Giles became the first in London to be laid out as public gardens.

**The Midland Railway's impact on the burial ground**

High Speed 1 was not the first railway scheme to disturb the burial ground, which remained intact for scarcely a decade after its closure. In the 1860s the builders of the Midland Railway faced the challenge of crossing the disused burial ground with their tracks and the resulting treatment of human remains caused controversy. The railway was built across the churchyard on a viaduct in 1866, while a cut-and-cover railway tunnel was constructed to

the east to join the Metropolitan Railway at King's Cross. These works resulted in the hasty removal of a large number of burials and the Bishop of London made representations to the Home Secretary on behalf of the vicar of St Pancras, who had observed skulls and thigh-bones scattered 'heedlessly about', while a burial pit 40 feet deep was excavated on the site of the present-day Coroner's Court for the reinterment of the remains of over 7,000 individuals. These graphic scenes made a deep impression on one of 19th-century England's greatest writers. As a young architecture student working under Arthur Blomfield, Thomas Hardy oversaw the exhumation works at St Pancras. In 1882, Hardy – now a celebrated novelist and poet – was moved by his experiences to write a poem entitled 'The Levelled Churchyard', the second verse of which reads:

*We late lamented, resting here  
Are mixed to human jam  
And each to each exclaims in fear  
I know not which I am!*

In early 2002 ground reduction works for a new retaining wall in the south-east corner of St Pancras Gardens allowed archaeological recording of four of the six cast-iron piers that had supported the 1866 viaduct until its demolition in 1909, when the railway embankment was extended to the west.

#### **High Speed 1 archaeological works**

Construction of an extended platform for Eurostar trains necessitated the clearance of the southern part of the St Pancras Burial Ground, which had been buried beneath the old Midland Railway embankment. An exhumation contractor undertook this work in 2002 and 2003, with archaeologists in attendance to record the burials. From January 2003 this allowed integrated exhumation and archaeological recording work to proceed, running alongside the groundworks programme.<sup>10</sup> This approach involved mechanical excavation by the exhumation contractor to expose coffins. Archaeological recording of stratigraphic relationships between individual burials and soil layers was not possible within the available schedule, but three-dimensional survey data was captured. This data has been analysed using a modelling program to reconstruct coffin stack sequences (Fig. 6). Comparison of coffin lid OD levels within grave plots has determined the extent of vertical compaction, in some cases illustrating how later coffins had sunk into those below.

Accurate location of named burials provided a crucial link between the archaeological data and documentary evidence, allowing study of the management of the cemetery.<sup>11</sup> The parish burial registers contained entries for the period 1793 to 1804, which included alphanumeric grave plot references, but no key plan survived. Of the 119 recorded burials identified by coffin plate inscriptions, 29 could be matched with register entries for which a plot reference was given. This allowed the spatial referencing scheme to be decoded, and rows of graves apparent in the archaeological record were reconciled with those originally conceived by the cemetery administrators.

Stratigraphic and documentary analysis has led to the definition of

several periods of cemetery use: no *in situ* burials can be ascribed to the period 1588–1793, though memorial stones and tombs were recovered; the expansion of the cemetery and burials between 1793 and 1812 can be related to alphanumeric plot references in burial registers and includes initial use of the Third Ground; the period 1812–1830 includes the foundation of St Pancras New Church in 1822; and the years 1830–1854 form a period characterised by burial trenches and mass graves.<sup>12</sup>

The burial sample collected for analysis was selected with respect to observable characteristics of the coffin and human remains. A disproportionate emphasis on recovery of ornamented coffins could bias the osteological sample towards individuals of higher socio-economic status, so a corresponding sample of individuals occupying plain coffins was also retrieved. A statistically significant sample of sub-adults was prioritised for study, though this does bias the overall age profile. Skeletons exhibiting interesting pathologies were also targeted for recovery, though many coffins were filled by groundwater which hindered selection. A total of 780 burials were taken to the laboratory for processing, of which 715 underwent full osteological analysis.

The quality of preservation of wooden coffins, metal coffin fittings, and human bone was exceptional due to the site's clay soil. Coffins from

lower, wetter levels were generally complete and structurally sound, though ground pressure had caused some to collapse inwards. Decorative coffin fittings were fabricated in thin iron sheet and often coated in tin, their ephemeral nature reflecting the brevity of the period of mourning for which they would be visible. Over 1100 fittings have been retained for specialist reference at the Museum of London.

The unusual survival of legible inscribed coffin plates proved to be one of the most valuable facets of the material recovered, and provides a vital link with the parish burial registers and documented biographical detail. Burial clothes and textile coffin linings were also found. The coffins of Mrs Mary Arrit (d. 1795, aged 55) and Rebecca Maskoll (d. 1806, aged 62) contained box and bay from floral tributes (see Fig. 6 for location of latter).

A total of 647 headstones and 88 structural elements of tombs originating from St Pancras and the adjacent St Giles burial grounds were recovered. Most had been incorporated into the early 20th-century dry-stone wall and railway embankment to the east of the church. Others formed a pavement between the pier bases of the 1866 railway viaduct. Inscriptions on the memorials indicate a date range of 1708–1862. None of the St Pancras memorial stones could be attributed to individual burials recorded during the exhumation, probably reflecting their origin in other areas of the cemetery.



**Fig. 3:** view of one of the smaller turntables being excavated in the St Pancras Station undercroft (copyright: HSI)



Fig. 4: recording the Midland engine turntable (62'8" or 19.10m in diameter) (copyright: HSI)

Nonetheless, their examination in tandem with that of the metal coffin fittings allowed a comparative investigation of stylistic development between the two forms of funereal ornament. Archaeological recording of memorial stones<sup>13</sup> was based upon techniques and typologies developed by Mytum.<sup>14</sup> Analysis of memorial stones for individuals with biographical data has provided insights into the relationship between social and religious background and funerary practice.

The results of the osteological study are made more significant by the heterogeneous population buried at St Pancras, ranging from French aristocrats and prelates to paupers who died in the local workhouse. Recorded diseases reflect the changing behaviours and stresses of life in a rapidly urbanising and industrialising environment, including syphilis, known to contemporaries as the 'French Disease'.<sup>15</sup> High rates of tooth-enamel hypoplasia and evidence of growth retardation support suggestions that this was a predominantly poor urban population, although a below-average prevalence of *cribra orbitalia*, rickets and D.I.S.H. appears to contradict this. Poor dental health seems to have been endemic. Sadly, we cannot tell what proportion of the burials were victims of the cholera epidemics that struck 19th-century London, since the illness leaves no skeletal trace. Evidence of dissection recorded on several skeletons probably represents both surgical practice and autopsy. The Anatomy Act of 1832, making it easier for surgeons to acquire

cadavers for dissection, was passed whilst the Third Ground at St Pancras churchyard was in use, with inmates of the nearby workhouse and executed criminals being prime candidates.

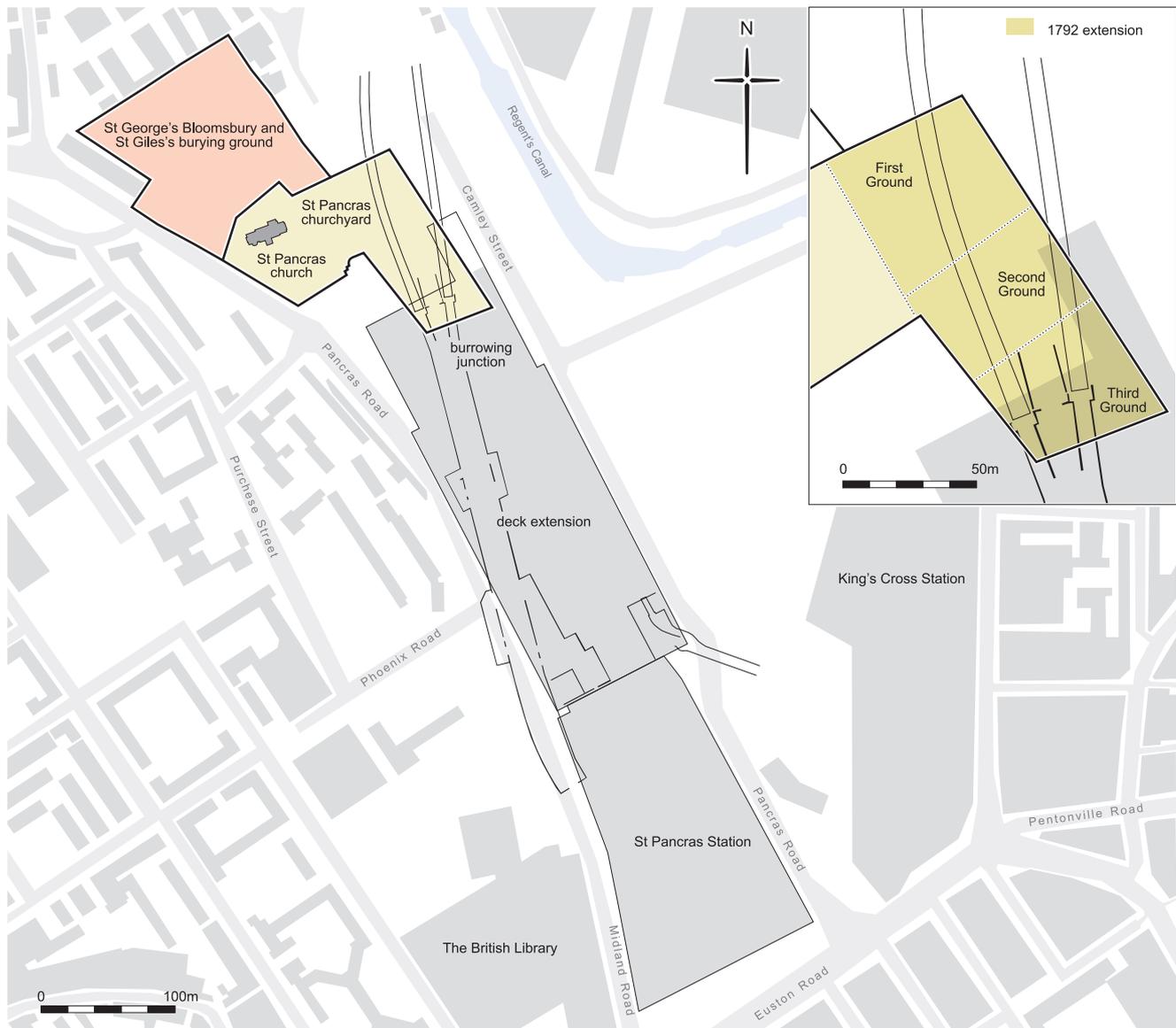
Documentary research into the composition of the buried population at St Pancras was of crucial importance in showing that the cemetery included people from outside the metropolis and immigrants, the latter chiefly comprising refugees from the French Revolution from 1792 onwards. London's late 18th-century emergence as an industrialised capital city was reflected by the increased representation of paupers and the lower working class at St Pancras. A workhouse had existed in the parish from 1730 and its successor was established in 1805 just to the north of the burial ground. Positive identification of pauper burials from monuments and coffin furnishings is difficult, as it appears that some parish burials made prior to the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1832 were relatively well provided for, and some even had individual memorials. Later pauper burials are thought to have been particularly concentrated in the Third Ground, and were made in open trenches at its south end. This was borne out by archaeological evidence for a transition from grave-specific coffin stacks to linear trenches within which coffins were laid alternately head to toe. This change in cemetery management came after the foundation of St Pancras New Church in 1822, which left the 'old church' as little more than a mortuary chapel, and may have been a practical

response to increased mortality, partly resulting from the cholera epidemics that took place after 1828.

Twenty-four name plates, c. 15% of the assemblage, identify émigrés from France and her colonies, suggesting that c. 200 of the 1,300 burials recorded archaeologically may have been French citizens. Among the burials associated with plates were those of three aristocrats: Jean Charles Julien d'Andigné (b. 1749, d. 1824), Jacques Philippe, Comte de Marguenat (b. 1739/40 d. 1793) (Fig. 7) and Paul François Marie, Comte de Monstiers (b. 1760, d. 1837).<sup>16</sup>

At least five of the coffins recorded during the exhumation works were occupied by French clergymen. The recovery of the remains of Arthur Richard Dillon, Archbishop of Narbonne (b. 1731, d. 1806) and Pierre Augustin Godart de Belbeuf, last bishop of Avranches (b. 1730, d. 1808) aroused particular interest, both in France and Britain. Mgr Dillon's coffin was triple-shelled, comprising inner and outer wooden caskets separated by an intermediate lead lining. It was located in the second row from the east edge of the cemetery and overlay the coffin of 59-year-old Mr Joseph Hudson, who had died only eleven days before the cleric (Fig. 6). The Archbishop was buried with his fine set of porcelain dentures, secured in the mouth by a pair of gold springs, though only one was still present. The dentures are likely to be the work of pioneering *dentiste* Nicholas Dubois de Chemant, who had a furnace at the Sèvres factory and obtained a royal patent for 'mineral paste teeth' from Louis XVI in 1789, before leaving for England as an economic migrant in 1792.<sup>17</sup>

A century before the arrival of the French, the burial ground of St Pancras Old Church was already favoured as a resting place for Catholics, particularly those from the upper social classes.<sup>18</sup> Many were political 'outsiders' who supported the exiled Catholic House of Stuart rather than the Hanoverian monarchy in the 18th century. But not all of the 'outsiders' buried here were motivated by religion or royalism. Maurice Margarot (1745–1815) was living in France at the time of the Revolution but returned to Britain in 1792 and joined the London



**Fig. 5:** plan showing the St Pancras Burial Ground areas, including the 'Third Ground' and the extent of associated archaeological investigations (copyright: HSI)

Corresponding Society, which was inspired by Jacobinism to discuss parliamentary and constitutional reform. The lengthy sentence of transportation that he and his wife endured in Australia illustrates the authorities' fear and suspicion of revolutionary France, a sharp contrast to the widespread sympathy extended to anti-Revolutionary exiles.

St Pancras experienced a dramatic transition from a 'rural' to 'urban' character during the 18th and 19th centuries, with all the demographic and environmental implications that suggests. Changes in the composition of the living population, and the conditions in which it lived and worked, can be identified in the buried remains. The burial ground extension of the Third Ground witnessed 61 years of sustained heavy use, on a scale that was

not anticipated when it was opened. The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the population of London rise rapidly. The population of the parish of St Pancras increased from less than 600 to 31,779 between 1776 and 1801, a 53-fold increase.<sup>19</sup> It had reached 46,333 by 1811, 71,838 by 1821, 103,548 by 1831, 129,763 by 1841 and 166,956 by 1851.<sup>20</sup> By the 1840s many of the London burial grounds were in an unsanitary state as they struggled to accommodate the dead from the fast-growing city. The grotesque crowding of London's churchyards generated heated debate, in light of the cholera outbreaks that rocked the city after 1828.

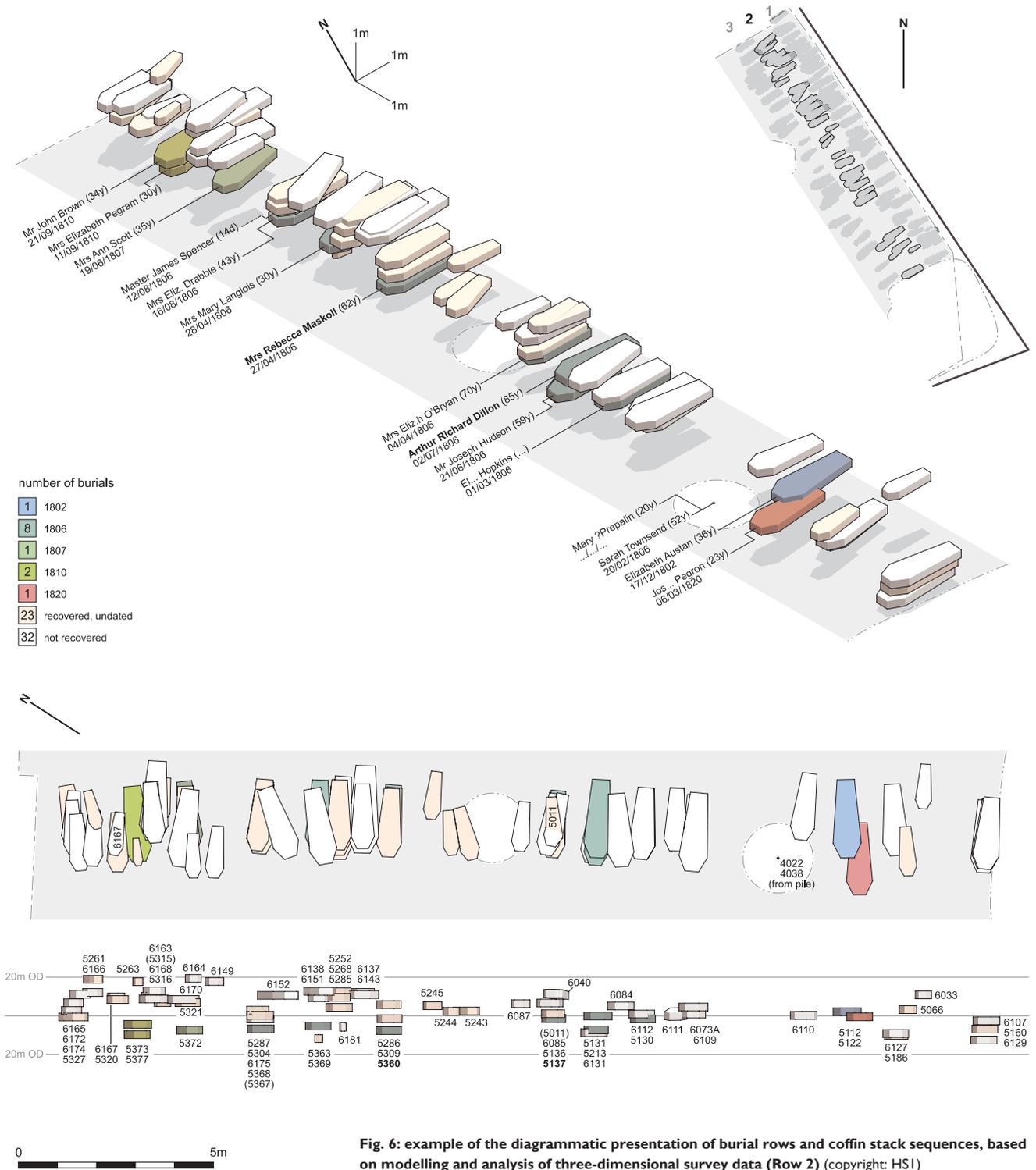
St Pancras churchyard came under scrutiny from those committed to the closure of London's old burial grounds and the opening of new cemeteries

beyond the city limits. Burials recorded in the St Pancras parish registers reveal peaks in 1833 (1,754), 1837 (1,653) and the year of its closure in 1854 (1,865). The 1833 peak probably related to a major cholera epidemic.

### Conclusions

The wealth of documentary evidence from St Pancras testifies to the complexity and 'oddness' of the burials as a study group. Intimate biographical insights for some of those buried reveal the importance of tradition, belief and idiosyncratic personal choice in burial location. The project provides a salutary warning of the dangers of trite or deterministic explanations of funerary practice. With burial numbers increasing so rapidly during the period of the Third Ground's use, and with so many social and cultural factors

# ST PANCRAS BURIAL GROUND



influencing the evolution of funerary practice, attempts at generalised explanation seem unwise.

Definition of a valid sample for osteological study is inherently shaped by our understanding of the social historical questions prioritised by researchers. While we may seek to view the archaeological evidence from the burial ground as representing the development and customs of a community, the cemetery absorbed

‘outsiders’ from disparate backgrounds. Social historians can play a key role in informing the archaeological research agenda and also have much to gain from acknowledging the value of archaeological results for the period.<sup>21</sup> The St Pancras experience demonstrates that articulating the historical records with key archaeological data at an early stage can help researchers formulate and implement intelligent sampling strategies that include the strategic

involvement of other specialists, particularly osteologists.

### Epilogue

The human remains exhumed at St Pancras had to be analysed quickly and returned to the exhumation contractor for reinterment at St Pancras Cemetery in East Finchley within two months of discovery. For two individuals, however, the journey was not yet over. Special arrangements were made for the

reburial of the two prelates, Dillon and Belbeuf, in a discrete shared grave. Mgr Dillon's remains were re-exhumed on 7th March 2007, and the Archbishop made his poignant final journey back to France just over two hundred years after his death. An enthusiastic welcome culminated in a grand funeral procession to Narbonne Cathedral on 15th March 2007. The remains and inscribed coffin plate of Mgr Godart de Belbeuf were taken to Avranches on 13th September 2009, where the bishop was reunited with his predecessors at the Saint-Gervais Basilica. These repatriations remind us that the remains of notable individuals can be of great cultural significance.

### Acknowledgements

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Fig. 7: coffin plate of Jacques Philippe, Comte de Marguenat (b. 1739/40 d. 1793) (copyright: HSI)

provided documentary research. Dr Sarah Tarlow (University of Leicester) kindly gave advice during the latter stages of the post-excavation work. Dom Aidan Bellenger (Abbot of Downside) gave valuable information about the French émigré clergy. Michael Rennie generously allowed access to his database of burial register

entries. Figs 1, 5 and 6 were prepared by Carlos Lemos (Museum of London Archaeology). Professor Olivier Chaline (La Sorbonne) provided invaluable information about Mgr Godart de Belbeuf. Finally, we are grateful to Professor Jacques Michaud for enabling our shared aspiration to return Mgr Dillon to Narbonne to be fulfilled.

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