

Recording and cataloguing the University of Reading collection of coffin plates from St Marylebone Church, Westminster

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Introduction

In the early 1980s the burials in the crypt of St Marylebone Church were removed and reburied in Brookwood Cemetery, Surrey. During this clearance, the coffin plates were collected and they were subsequently acquired by the University of Reading Department of Typography and Graphic Communication.

In 2004–6 MOLA conducted developer-funded excavations in the St Marylebone School playground, formerly the churchyard for St Marylebone Church, excavating a sample of the 18th- and 19th-century burials.¹ During this project a total of 108 coffin plates were recorded. In 2013 MOLA excavated part of the Paddington Street burial ground,² a secondary ground for the parish, and a further 66 coffin plates were recovered and analysed during 2013–14.

Together with the excavated plates, the Reading collection is part of the largest group of coffin plates from a

single parish population in Britain, yet they remained uncatalogued and without any archaeological or biographical record, aside from a very few published by the University Typography Department, primarily for the style of lettering they exhibit.³ In September 2013 MOLA obtained funding from the Marc Fitch Fund and CgMS to create a full database of the Reading coffin plates, including the biographical information they contained and the details of the plate types, styles and decoration. The plates were recorded onto an Excel spreadsheet and photographed by the authors in September 2013.

This article summarises the general character of the Reading plate collection and outlines the inherent research potential which it offers.

The Reading coffin plates

Typical 19th-century crypt burials were in 'triple-shell' coffins, formed of a wooden inner coffin with a plain inner breastplate sealed in a lead shell, which was then covered with a second wooden outer coffin. The latter was the main decorative coffin which was visible at the funeral, usually covered in a textile such as velvet held on with a pattern of upholstery pins, with breastplate, lid motifs, escutcheons, grips and grip plates. They sometimes also possessed a foot-plate.

The vast majority of the Reading collection consisted of inner and outer breastplates, but a few footplates were also included, and even a small number of engraved lead shell lids. The breastplates fall into four main categories, based on their construction material: tin-dipped iron, lead and

copper alloy (normally brass) and zinc.

Lead breastplates come in two main forms, depositum (outer) plates and inner plates. The depositum plate was the main decorative plate attached to the wooden outer coffin, and was intended to be seen at the funeral. These plates were produced with a variety of designs, examples of which have been recorded from other archaeological excavations. Lead plates have much more variation than the cheaper, stamped tin-dipped iron plates. The raised borders in particular tend to be individually hand-chased. Although identical plates are found, it is much more common to find plates that have the same general appearance, but which on closer examination have variations in the foliage, scallop shells, flowers and other features. The inner plates attached directly to a lead shell and are normally plain, often with an inscribed or punched border, and were used to identify the coffin. A typical example is that of Henrietta Alexander which can be seen in Fig. 1.

There were 942 plates in the Reading collection, representing 658 individuals (many were represented by both inner and outer plates), dating from 1817, when the current church was built, to the crypt's closure in 1853. Those recorded consisted of 538 outer plates (431 brass, 90 lead, 12 zinc and 5 tin-dipped iron), 389 inner plates (388 lead and 1 zinc), 10 footplates (all lead) and 5 where the inscription directly into the lead shell lid had been retained. The collection does contain a further c. 255 footplates, all plain and with limited data, which were not recorded during this part of the project. The number of tin-dipped iron plates



Fig. 1: inner plate of Henrietta Alexander

recovered was very low, probably due to the fragility of the material, and it can be assumed that many more would originally have been present in the crypt.

The plates from St Marylebone crypt come in three regular shapes, rectangular, diamond and trapezoid, with occasional bespoke forms such as shield-shaped. Each brass plate was individually produced and engraved and therefore cannot be directly compared with others. The inscriptions were engraved rather than acid etched. The thicker parts of the engraving were often filled with a black wax or enamel. An example can be seen in Fig. 2, the plate of The Right Honourable John, Viscount Kelburne, dated 1818.

Research potential

There are major two avenues of research which are offered by the Reading plate collection. The first is stylistic. No detailed analysis of the designs has yet been undertaken but initial studies show that the single most common design for decorated lead plates at St Marylebone (66%) is the boss or shield flanked by two flowers and leaves. While there are a number of variations within this theme, the basic design continues from the 1770s through to the 1850s. In the earlier examples the central shield is a rococo design, which becomes more classically shield-shaped over time (such as that of Martha Udny, died 1831, see Fig. 3). The flowers and leaves also vary, from large flowers with small leaves through to small flowers with large leaves, a variation which does not seem to be date related. Other common styles of the period include the 'Angel and Trumpet' design only five of which were recorded from the collection. One of these was highly unusual in that the lettering was painted on in gold paint.

By comparing the collection with the other Marylebone parish plates, and eventually with other collections nationally, it should be possible to produce a catalogue of styles including a chronology, as well as determining a relative status for the individual represented on the plate based on cost.

The second research theme is documentary. There is a wealth of biographical data on the plates which can be used to research the individuals buried in the crypt and their families.

Marylebone was a parish associated with people of high status during the 18th and 19th centuries and the crypt would have been the final resting place for the upper echelons of Marylebone society. This is reflected by the data on the plates, with a large number of titled individuals as well as high-ranking armed forces personnel, Members of Parliament and wealthy merchants. One unexpected aspect is the high number of employees of the East India Company or their families. At least 15 plates specify the East India Company and preliminary research indicates that many more individuals in the crypt were employed by the Company without it being mentioned on the plates.

There is a large number of documentary sources for the parish of Marylebone, which can be consulted for information regarding the crypt population. These include parish registers for St Marylebone, which are held in London Metropolitan Archives and survive for baptisms, marriages and deaths for the period 1668–1855. Burial registers also exist covering the use of the crypt. The extensive vestry records for the parish of St Marylebone are held in the City of Westminster Archives. Because the population was high status, the potential for research is almost limitless. Genealogy websites yield data regarding births, marriages and familial connections. Preliminary investigations reveal that many of the individuals are mentioned in *The Times* newspaper columns for a variety of reasons and portraits exist for others. Some have



fig. 2: brass plate of The Right Honourable John, Viscount Kelburne



Fig. 3: lead plate of Martha Udny

official biographies, notably in Parliamentary journals and The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

Conclusions

Currently there is no definitive typology of post-medieval coffin plates. Two London sites, Christchurch Spitalfields⁴ and St Pancras Church⁵ have provided partial type references but these are neither complete nor widely used. The Marylebone plates will greatly enhance the progress towards a more definitive typology.

In terms of quantity and status the Reading coffin plates are unique in Britain. The collection and by extension the plates from excavations within the parish of St Marylebone, provide a valuable source of data which can be used to study a large and high-status population in London. Coffin plates from the period contain a wealth of biographical information about the buried individuals. At present there is no comprehensive database of coffin plates, although the details from several hundred plates are recorded in a variety of locations. The recording of the Reading plates will be a step towards the creation of such a database.

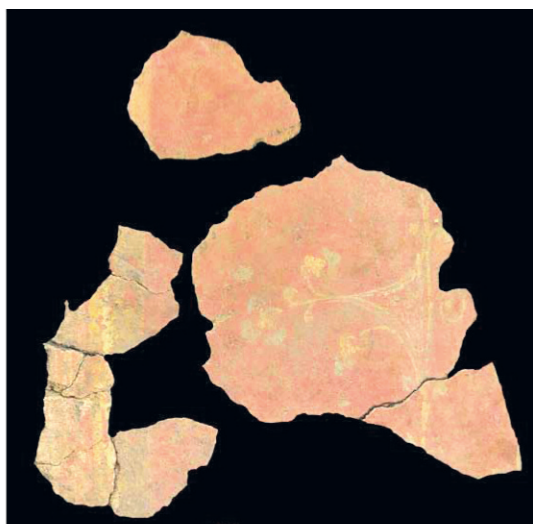
Acknowledgements

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Tabard Square: transforming Londinium

A forthcoming report details the excavation that has changed the prevailing view of Roman Southwark, and yielded important new evidence for religious practice, suburban development and Londinium itself. Victoria Ridgeway previews the findings.

Excavations by Pre-Construct Archaeology at Tabard Square in 2002 have transformed our understanding of a part of Roman Southwark which was previously anticipated to be marginal land on the fringes of settlement at best. This area, at the southern periphery of



Londinium, was actually the location of a major Romano-Celtic temple complex, established in the mid second century, adjacent to a channel of the Thames and to the approach road into the settlement from Richborough and ports to the south-east.

Throughout the prehistoric and Roman periods the site occupied a low-lying position adjacent to Borough Channel, on Southwark's 'mainland'. The broader landscape during prehistoric periods was one of low sand or gravel islands (eyots) separated by channels acting as distributaries of the River Thames. The environment was fluid and changeable, frequently inundated, but with periods of drier conditions. A distinct scatter of knapped flint and an associated hearth characterise the temporary camps which occupied these sandy islands from as early as around 10,000 years ago; the flintworking assemblage and traces of ardmarks attest to repeated



visitation and exploitation of this environment into the Late Bronze Age.

The first attempts to alter and control this localised landscape were made during the early Roman period, when the area was prone to diurnal flooding at the very least, and perhaps constantly wet during winter months. Entering Roman Southwark from the south-east, the approach along Watling Street would almost certainly have followed a narrow course, hemmed in by cemeteries, mausolea and walled burial grounds to the south and wetlands to the north, before reaching the junction with Stane Street and the causeway onto the south island of Southwark, heading towards the settlement on the north bank. Here, just to the east of the crossing point, a concerted program of timber piling, following dumping of building rubble and sand, gradually overcame the risk of flooding and reclaimed low-lying land. The earliest clay and timber

Miles et al cont'd...

especially Professor Paul Luna and Charlene McGroarty for providing a studio, time and the photographic lighting necessary to conduct the work.

Adrian Miles is a Senior Archaeologist at MOLA with 30 years of experience in the field. Adrian is the leading expert on the archaeology of post-medieval burials in England and has written extensively on post-medieval coffin furniture for a number of organisations. His published work includes the MOLA

monographs presenting the results of the excavations at St Marylebone Church (Miles et al 2008) and most recently three non-conformist burial grounds in Tower Hamlets (Henderson et al 2013).

Robin Wroe-Brown at the time of writing was a Project Officer at MOLA. Robin began a career in archaeology in 1979 and joined MOLA in 1985. Robin has worked on several post-medieval burial excavations with Adrian Miles and has collaborated with him on a

number of publications, including St Marylebone Church (Miles et al 2008).

Sarah Ritchie at the time of writing was a Senior Archaeologist at MOLA. Sarah has worked in professional archaeology since 2006, mainly with MOLA in London, including supervising a major post-medieval burial ground excavation at Marshall Street, Westminster. She has also worked widely abroad in both voluntary and professional capacities. She has extensive experience in documentary research.

1. A. Miles, N. Powers and R. Wroe-Brown with D. Walker *St Marylebone church and burial ground in the 18th to 19th centuries: excavations at St Marylebone school, 1992 and 2004-6*, MOLA Mongr Ser 46 (2008).
2. Museum of London site code PGN12.

3. [stbride.org/friends/conference/hidden typography/deadletters.html/](http://stbride.org/friends/conference/hidden%20typography/deadletters.html/)

4. J. Reeve and M. Adams *The Spitalfields Project. Volume 1: The Archaeology - Across the Styx* CBA Res Rep 85 (1993).

5. A. Miles 'Coffins and coffin fittings' in P. Emery and K. Wooldridge *St Pancras Burial Ground: excavations at the site of the new London terminus of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, 2002-3* Gifford Monogr Ser (2011).

buildings were domestic in nature, lining a road set roughly perpendicular to Watling Street, and appear to have been relatively well-appointed with finely-executed plaster schemes.

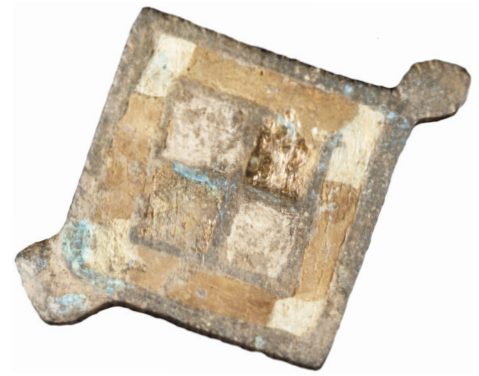
But, it is the temple complex constructed here in the second century that provides Tabard Square's most significant archaeological remains. The mid second century saw a transformation of the landscape with domestic buildings swept away, the area levelled once more and a large gravelled precinct constructed, adorned with two Romano-Celtic temples, numerous plinths, altars and columns. Metalwork and worked stone fragments have shown us that a larger-than-life-size bronze statue, wearing sandals and probably socks (see front cover), may have topped one of the plinths, whilst others were adorned with stone statues. The temple interiors would have been dark, plastered and painted with deep red schemes, embellished with finely-painted candelabra and floral sprays.

Many readers of *London Archaeologist* will be familiar with the 'pot of face cream' recovered from a ditch defining the eastern extent of the precinct. Less well-known is the recovery of a second canister, of identical, if larger, design, found crushed and broken from a later fill of

the same feature. More famous still, perhaps, is the inscription dedicated to Mars Camulus, set up by *Tiberinius Celerianus* and carved on white marble, which references the *Londiniensi*, or 'people of London'. This had been placed with some apparent reverence, text facing upwards, at the base of a shaft, carefully covered with a similarly-sized piece of tile. A second, tiny fragment of an inscription on fine crystalline marble, and of similar or slightly earlier date, was recovered from a medieval pit, very close to where the first inscription was found. Only five letters of this fragmentary piece survive, but there are tantalising hints that this may have been a dedication related to the initial establishment of the temple complex; the Mars Camulus inscription was apparently not alone.

The complex was modified and embellished through time; a dividing wall and possible portico were constructed in the third century, setting each temple building within its own *temenos*. By the fourth century the precinct had contracted to a small enclosed area, with an enigmatic winged corridor building set to the south-east.

The excavations at Tabard Square have radically altered our perceptions of Roman London's ritual landscape



and a short preview such as this cannot hope to encapsulate the range and quality of finds from the site. The investigations were extensive, covering around 1.15 hectares, with a frontage on Long Lane extending for approximately 140m. An important sequence of medieval and later phases of activity was also uncovered and will be reported on in due course. The archaeological works were generously funded by Berkeley Homes, represented by Nansi Rosenberg and managed by Gary Brown and Peter Moore. Archaeological excavations were directed by Dougie Killock. Now, following many years of post-excavation analysis and collating of reports, design and layout of a monograph focussed on the Roman period remains is underway, due for publication in autumn this year.

OPPOSITE TOP the crushed and distorted canister, of lead alloy, is identical in shape to the canister found containing a probable cosmetic preparation

OPPOSITE LEFT the interior of the temples would have been dark, with red-panelled walls decorated with floral motifs and candelabra

ABOVE the enamelled lid of a seal box, one of several from the site. Once believed to seal letters, these are now considered more likely to have been used to secure bags of money

BELOW LEFT obvious votives from the site were few, this miniature axehead being a notable exception

BELOW RIGHT plan of the site and surrounding area showing the temple complex as initially laid out in the mid second century (all images ©Pre-Construct Archaeology Limited)

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