

# Lost Congregations: the crisis facing later post-medieval urban burial grounds

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*This article takes as its point of departure the loss of various 18th and 19th-century burial grounds to development in South Yorkshire. Case studies are given based upon recent work at Sheffield Cathedral, the Peace Gardens, and Carver Street Methodist Chapel, Sheffield, as well as the New Street Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, Barnsley. Current archaeological approaches to the study of 18th and 19th-century burials are far from satisfactory. There is an urgent need for curatorial archaeologists to stress the importance of such later post-medieval urban burial grounds to potential developers, and for contracting archaeologists to ensure that proper provision, both in terms of access and funding, is made by their clients for appropriate scientific study.*

*The information gained from the study of later post-medieval urban burials would benefit from synthesis and analysis at a regional level. This may serve to establish variations in osteological data, as well as funerary practices and associated material culture within and between different congregational groups and different localities. In support of this suggestion we examine the significance of Nonconformist burial grounds and identify some potential research questions for future work.*

## ***Introduction: the archaeology of later post-medieval burials***

One of the biggest problems facing the study of later post-medieval burial archaeology is the lack of published parallels. It can be argued that even the extensive investigations at Spitalfields (Reeve & Adams, 1993), one of the few projects to be fully published in recent years, has had a fairly minimal impact upon the wider literature concerned with death and burial in the post-medieval period (Boyle, 1999). Excavations at Spitalfields succeeded in highlighting what could be gained by studying burial practices and human remains from the post-medieval period, however, their focus on high-status burial vaults distracted attention from those sites more frequently encountered by field archaeologists, ie more mundane burials in simple graves from the 18th and 19th centuries.

Occasionally burial grounds are subject to a last-minute archaeological watching brief with little or no funding. St Nicholas, Bathampton (Cox, 1998) St Nicholas, Sevenoaks (Boyle & Keevill, 1998) and the Peace Gardens, Sheffield (Belford, 2000) are all examples of sites where limited salvage excavations or watching briefs were carried out in tandem with human remains clearance companies. Other sites are lost with no opportunity for archaeological observation. Construction workers engaged in town-centre re-development projects often fail to recognise or report the disturbance of human remains. Many fear that the involvement of archaeologists will lead to costly delays, or even cause the development to be halted.

Harding (1998) suggests that it is not the shortage of evidence relating to later post-medieval burials that is the problem, but how this information has been dealt with. A large number of unpublished client reports are produced by archaeological field units each year, mostly as a result of watching brief activity. Despite this intensity of work very little material is published. Sites such as St Augustine-the-Less, Bristol (Boore, 1998) St Nicholas, Sevenoaks (Boyle & Keevill, 1998) St Nicholas, Bathampton (Cox, 1995) St Bride's Church Fleet Street, London (Scheuer, 1998) The High Street, Staines (Stock, 1998a.) Bathford, Bath (Stock, 1998b.) and London Road, Kingston upon Thames (Bashford, & Pollard, 1998) have all been only partially published. Many investigations, such as those conducted at St Nicholas', Sevenoaks, Kent (Boyle, 1998) were initiated to investigate earlier remains, but encountered later-post-medieval burials, allowing some limited observations to be made.

## ***Recent work in Sheffield***

Sheffield experienced rapid growth as a result of late-18th century industrialisation. The population of the central township and parish rose from 14,531 in 1736 to 45,755 in 1801. By 1851 the new borough of Sheffield had grown to become a burgeoning industrial centre, with a population of 135,310 (Hey 1998). This increase was reflected in the provision of places of worship - by both the Church of England and Nonconformist groups. In the years following 1800 a wave of evangelical Methodism gained strong

support in the town and a number of chapels and burial grounds were constructed within Sheffield.

Several of these later post-medieval cemeteries and burial grounds have been destroyed or damaged as a result of recent development work. These include the burial grounds of St Mary's Church, and St John's Park, and Howard Street Congregational Church. The burial grounds for these churches and chapels were partially removed in the course of road improvement schemes. The Infirmary Cemetery and St Philip's Cemetery, Infirmary Road, were both totally destroyed as a result of road improvements and the construction of the Sheffield Super Tram. Burials associated with the Carver Street Methodist Chapel were also partially destroyed by engineering works carried out in advance of the Super Tram Project; no opportunity was given for archaeological recording work to take place.

Engineering works associated with the construction of the Supertram also led to the removal of human remains from the burial ground of Sheffield Cathedral, in 1993. The removal of a portion of the Cathedral burial ground caused much controversy and public outcry ensued. The Sheffield *Star* newspaper reported that: *'Shocked office workers are overlooking the exhumation of bodies from the historic Sheffield Cathedral.'* (Dawes, 1993) Public outcry arose as a result of the nature of the removal of the human remains. A ten-foot high security screen erected by the grave clearance company proved insufficient to prevent a direct line of sight from surrounding office buildings. Witnesses were outraged to see a mechanical digger being used to lift coffins, and workmen allegedly throwing human remains into black plastic bags.

This is not an uncommon situation and many later post-medieval cemeteries have been subjected to this kind of treatment. However, in this case the public furor raises an important legal issue. Although no attempt was made to prosecute the clearance company - public anger was quietened by the rapid erection of a forensic tent - the operation technically breached two requirements of the Home Office Licence for the Removal of Human Remains. Condition 2a) states *'The removal shall be effected with due care and attention to decency'* and 2b) *'The ground in which the remains are interred shall be screened from the public gaze while the work of removal is in process.'*

The Home Office Coroner's Section is not responsible for enforcing the requirements of licences to remove burials. This responsibility falls upon local constabularies (Earle, pers comm). In addition, the Home Office is not required to consult with English Heritage when granting a licence. This omission has led to the removal of archaeological material of different periods (Parker Pearson, 1999).

### *The Peace Gardens: St Paul's Church*

The first phase of Sheffield City Council's ongoing 'Heart of the City' regeneration project commenced in 1997 with the re-development of the city-centre Peace Gardens. The Peace

Gardens, an area of public open-space adjoining Sheffield Town Hall, occupied the former site of St Paul's Church and burial ground. St Paul's Church was constructed in 1720 in a flamboyant Baroque style reminiscent of contemporary London churches (Belford, 2000). The church did not come into use for twenty years after its initial construction due to a dispute over its presentation. Protestant dissenter Robert Downs - a local goldsmith - applied for permission to use the building as a Nonconformist meeting-house in 1739. This action by the dissenter community forced the Bishop of Gloucester to finally consecrate the church in 1740. The first burial took place in 1743 and the graveyard was deemed full and therefore disused from 1855. The graveyard is reputed to have contained over 8,000 burials and included at least three former Master Cutlers. The church appears to have been well-funded and represented the wealthier inhabitancy of Sheffield.

As part of the re-development of the Peace Gardens Sheffield City Council funded an archaeological evaluation of the site. This work followed a staged-approach, commencing with a desk-based assessment and leading on to geophysical survey and machine-assisted trial-trenching. The desk-based assessment established that St Paul's Church had been demolished in 1938 and that in the region of 8,000 burials had been exhumed from the burial ground and re-buried in Sheffield's Abbey Lane Cemetery between June and October of that year (Belford 2000). In the light of this information, although cautioning that some burials may have evaded detection and removal in the south-eastern corner of the site, field evaluation focused upon recovering evidence for the footings of St Paul's Church.

A resistivity survey of the site failed to produce any evidence of the church or burial ground; the land had been levelled and extensively re-modelled since the 1930s. In addition to this, the extent of the survey was limited by the presence of several surfaced paths and flower-beds. The geophysical survey was followed by the excavation of two machine-assisted trial trenches; trenches were laid out in the central and peripheral areas of the grounds, but no remains of the church footings survived and no other archaeological features or human remains were discovered.

At the time of the field evaluation Sheffield City Council had not secured the Millennium Lottery funding that was needed for the re-development to take place; Council officers were therefore unwilling to allow any potentially unnecessary damage to municipal flower-beds. In hind-sight this severely limited the scope and findings of the archaeological field evaluation.

In mid-September 1997, with the Millennium Lottery funding secured, re-development of the site commenced and within weeks human remains were encountered. At this point Sheffield City Council and their agents commissioned a commercial grave-clearance company to remove and rebury the remains from the site. One consideration guiding this

decision was the belief that the remains were comparatively recent in date, 1743-1855, and therefore not of archaeological interest. The opinion was expressed that the human remains should be quickly removed and reburied, since the possibility that there might be living relatives meant that public decency could be offended by exhumation.

Dr Andrew Chamberlain of the University of Sheffield and Sarah Whiteley of South Yorkshire Archaeology Service witnessed the machine-excavation of human remains and coffins. A proposal for the monitoring of this work was put forward by ARCUS to Sheffield City Council, and with the co-operation of the grave-clearance company limited archaeological observations were made. A team of archaeologists and osteologists directed by Paul Belford succeeded in excavating and recording the remains of 16 individuals from the burial ground. This analysis represented a sample of approximately 10% of the remains that were encountered during ground clearance work. A total of 13 fully-articulated burials were analysed during the archaeological observation. This revealed limited evidence of pathology, which was hampered by the fact that the remains could not be removed from the site, and were therefore examined in less than ideal conditions, *in-situ*. It was possible to identify that six of the articulated skeletons excavated were male and two female (Belford, 2000). Unfortunately the small scale of this salvage work meant that the sample was not a statistically viable one and the value of the information recovered is greatly diminished.

Material cultural recovered by excavation included a number of coffins and coffin-plates. The coffins were of the wooden single-shelled type, and the coffin plates varied in design, but generally appeared to be made of a tin-alloy indicating some limited degree of ostentation. Placing the issue of the poor sample size to one side, the importance of this site should not be overlooked. If nothing else it highlights the fact that many developers are still reluctant to acknowledge that later post-medieval burial grounds are of archaeological significance.

## *Methodist burial grounds*

### **Carver Street Methodist Chapel**

Excavation of part of the burial ground of the Carver Street Methodist Chapel took place in the summer of 1999 (Sayer, 2001). The developers initially approached ARCUS to conduct a watching brief very late in the refurbishment programme. The conditions placed upon the planning consent for the conversion had concentrated upon the fabric of the structure, and no requirement for archaeological monitoring had been placed upon the associated groundworks. Human remains were encountered during the construction of an external beer-cellar, to the rear of the chapel.

As the chapel was being converted into a sports-bar some pressure was placed upon the archaeological team to clear the

site quickly, to enable the bar to be open for business for the Rugby Union World Cup. However, the unexpected discovery of a large number of burials (101 articulated skeletons and the remains of at least 25-30 disarticulated individuals) meant that the project developed into a full-scale rescue excavation.

During the period of 1806 - 1855 Carver Street was the only major burial ground in Sheffield for the dissenter community (Hunter, 1869). One recent estimate, based on archival research, suggests that the burial ground may have held at least 1,600 inhumations (Witkin & Belford, 2000). Archaeological work was hampered by the absence of published parallels for Nonconformist chapels, and this initially led to some confusion as to what to expect. Indeed, Methodist chapels are not normally associated with burial grounds, and by 1842 the majority of Methodist burials were being conducted by members of the Church of England clergy, with Methodist chapels before this date being both rare and significant (Davies *et al*, 1978). Later Victorian Methodist burials tended to take place in garden cemeteries, as much because the Nonconformist community desired unconsecrated ground as because the space in urban burial grounds was filling up (Rugg, 1998).

Previous archaeological work on dissenter burial grounds has focused upon the evidence of Quaker rituals and practice, with highly specific research questions. These have included investigations of the style of grave-stones, the nature of mourning, and comparisons between the evident simplicity of dissenter funerary rituals with the ostentation of other 19th-century traditions (Stock, 1998b; Reeve & Adams, 1993; Boore, 1998; Litten, 1991).

Carver Street Methodist Chapel was built in 1805 and despite local antagonism (a previous Methodist chapel at Cheney Square in Sheffield had been demolished by rioters; Hey, 1998) became one of the most significant meeting-houses in England. The chapel is known to have hosted the National Methodist Conference eleven times during the 19th century (Witkin & Belford, 2000). Since Methodism attracted a mixed social group, ranging from the poorer members of society to local community-leaders and businessmen (Hey, 1976), some differences in the treatment and disposal of the dead might be expected from within such a broad congregation. The burials excavated at Carver Street were all found to be contained within simple single-shelled wooden coffins. Coffins were mostly constructed of oak with Scots Pine bottoms, although one coffin (out of eight analysed) was constructed of elm, a cheaper alternative to oak (Bagwell & Tyers, 2001). One burial was encased within a simple brick-lined grave with sandstone slabs over the top. The bricks used to construct this grave were imperfect and poorly manufactured, possibly indicating that poor quality building materials of no use to the living had been deliberately chosen. A setting of sandstone stone slabs found covering the burial

of a child may have been placed to protect the inhumation from grave-robbers (Sayer, 2001).

The lack of ostentation and a disregard for the quality of materials used in the furnishing of graves can be taken to suggest that during this first half of the 19th century the Methodist community placed more emphasis upon the living than on funerary rituals and the disposal of the dead. This is in direct contrast to the evidence from sites such as Spitalfields - which continued to accept burials up to 1852 - and serves to demonstrate the other extreme of Metropolitan ostentation available at the time (Reeve & Adams, 1993).

Some of the coffin furniture from Carver Street, especially the partial oak coffins, may be regarded as evidence for reasonably well-provided-for burials; but when compared with the double and triple-shelled coffins often found in Anglican contexts the coffins are fairly simple. Many of the coffins from Carver Street had pine bases indicating efforts to minimise the overall cost of burial.

The excavations at the Carver Street Methodist Chapel allow a comparative model of Methodist funerary behaviour to be constructed. When placed in context alongside other cemetery excavations in South Yorkshire, it allows us to move towards an understanding of regional mortuary behaviour in the 19th century. The study of Methodist chapels in general offers the opportunity to explore a social group outside the established church and to question the extent to which such dissenting groups influenced, or were themselves influenced by, broader economic and social trends.

### **New Street, Barnsley**

The remains of at least three individuals were discovered by contractors in April 2001, during renovation work inside the *Hedonism* night-club at New Street Barnsley, (Chamberlain & Sayer 2001). ARCUS were contacted by Barnsley constabulary and asked to establish the antiquity of the remains in order to rule out the possibility of a modern crime-scene. The renovators of the Grade II listed building had been previously advised by Barnsley Metropolitan Borough planning officers that no archaeological work would be necessary. The human remains were examined on site and through their association with 19th-century pottery and traces of a coffin stain, it was concluded that the remains were of that date (Chamberlain & Sayer 2001). It is likely that the remains were associated with the former New Street Methodist chapel. The New Street Methodist Chapel was opened in 1804 and remained in use until 1874. The chapel was still in use after the construction of a substantial Methodist chapel on Pitt Street in 1846, which resulted in other smaller chapels in Barnsley being demolished (Elliot, 1988). This suggests that the New Street chapel was of some significance to the dissenter community.

Surprisingly, the evidence points to a burial location *within* the walls of the original chapel. As far as we can

ascertain this is otherwise unknown in Nonconformist meeting-houses and chapels. One possible explanation may be that the congregation were anxious to protect the remains of their dead. Barnsley and Sheffield were particularly notorious for the activities of the Resurrectionists, both before and after the Anatomy Act of 1832 (Elliot, 1988). The shortage of a ready supply of usable corpses for medical schools led to a continuing need for illegally obtained cadavers (Richardson, 1989). In 1892 the Sheffield *Iris* reported upon the shipping of cadavers to the medical school in Edinburgh. The newspaper article discussed in detail the case of Mr and Mrs Yeardley of Barnsley, who were prosecuted for the illegal disinterment of a two-year-old child (Elliot, 1988). The Yeardeleys lived without any obvious source of income and are likely to have been conducting this activity for some time. In 1859 Mr Livesly, a sexton of St Philip's Church, Sheffield was tried for the keeping of false records and the '*ruthless disinterment*' of children from his graveyards. Livesly was accused of selling bodies to the medical institute for dissection; riot ensued and his house was burned down (Wheeler, 1999). A similar event in 1835 resulted in rioters, suspicious of grave robbing, burning down the Sheffield medical school. Although no human remains were recovered by the mob during this incident, the fear of Resurrectionist activity in Barnsley and Sheffield led to these towns gaining a reputation for grave-robbing (Hey, 1998).

Mid-19th-century paranoia over the threat of body-snatching found expression in the architecture of at least one South Yorkshire church. The congregation of Barnsley Parish Church commissioned the construction of an unusual fortified Gothic tower at the entrance to the church grounds and employed a night watchman to guard the graveyard from thieves (Elliot, 1988). It is possible that within this climate of fear and suspicion the Nonconformists who attended New Street chapel also attempted to protect their dead by burying them inside the chapel. Unfortunately requests to carry out further archaeological work within the chapel were declined and the developers were unwilling to disclose details of any further discoveries associated with the former chapel.

Nonconformist burial grounds are not common, which may be one reason why so many unmarked urban cemeteries are so easily overlooked. However, burials do exist and archaeological work carried out within chapels and on associated land should be mindful of their presence. Many chapel burial grounds contain as few as three or four burials, but, when considered as part of wider local and regional groupings, the study of even single graves can provide archaeologists with a valuable insight into individualism and attitudes to the body and church within the 19th century dissenting community. As the renovation of disused chapels continues such burials may turn out to be more common than was previously supposed.

### *Some wider issues related to later post-medieval burials*

Media attention surrounding the retention of human remains by medical institutions such as the Liverpool Alder Hay Children's Hospital (Boseley, 2000) and the United Bristol Hospital prompted a recent Royal College of Pathologists summit on the retention of human organs and tissues (The Royal College of Pathologists, 2001). This conference predicted that a wider clinical audit into medical school museums would reveal substantial archives of tissues and organs, many held prior to a requirement for legal consent, and therefore technically held without consent. The Royal College of Pathologists has since initiated a mechanism to allow easier audit of such institutions.

If the trend to audit institutions retaining human remains continues beyond medical schools then archaeological material archives may also be subject to audit. This is likely to reveal skeletal material stored outside of the requirements of the Home Office Licence for the removal of human remains. Under this system the retention of human remains is only permitted if they are of demonstrable scientific interest. However, the seemingly indefinite storage of human remains in archaeological unit stores is not uncommon. This is particularly true in urban areas where long-established excavation campaigns have amassed a backlog of unpublished material. Under these circumstances we argue that the post-excavation analysis and reburial of the recently dead should be made a priority. This will ensure that archaeologists are not accused of morbid curiosity and the unethical treatment of human remains. The danger that the archaeological study of death in the later post-medieval period may become little more than '*morbid voyeurism*' (as outlined by Morris, 1994) is a very real concern. The occurrence of watching briefs that do not equip the archaeologist with the appropriate resources to deal with the remains encountered in an appropriate and sensitive way would seem to be on the increase. This situation is not easily resolved and is likely to require a fundamental reassessment of our research priorities.

In the highly competitive world of commercial redevelopment archaeological contractors are not only forced to compete among themselves to secure work, but are also frequently required to compete with other areas of the commercial sector, such as grave-clearance companies. Specialist exhumation companies are in many cases faster and cheaper than archaeological contractors at clearing burial sites and it is therefore unrealistic to assume that it will always be possible to secure an appropriate level of archaeological input purely on the basis of cost. A compromise that is becoming commonplace is for archaeologists to work in partnership with exhumation companies. However, as the case studies of South Yorkshire sites have shown this is often a far from satisfactory solution.

We have attempted to demonstrate that it is possible to generate thought-provoking archaeological interpretations even under the most difficult circumstances. By comparing and contrasting the evidence gained from Carver Street Methodist Chapel within the evidence from the New Street Chapel we have advanced understanding by placing these sites within a specific local and regional cultural milieu - in this case focusing on the rise of Nonconformism. We believe that it will soon be possible to establish an understanding of differences in later post-medieval burial practices in Sheffield and to compare these with practices found in other areas. The opportunity will then exist to identify specifically local trends, and to highlight differences between the various social groups and sub-groups that made up early industrial society. While the Spitalfields Project (Reeve & Adams, 1993) is arguably the single most significant excavation within this field of study, archaeologists should be cautious when using it as a model for provincial excavations. More emphasis should instead be placed upon how the study of local cemeteries and burial grounds can contribute to the understanding of local communities, both in the past and present.

The Government Environmental Sub-Committee of the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs has resolved to undertake an inquiry into cemeteries (House of Commons, 2001). This sub-committee has heard from various institutions and individuals about the local importance of maintaining cemeteries as open spaces, centres for mourning and recreation. There have been more than 129 submissions to the committee, many from 'friends of cemeteries' (see - Friends of the General Cemetery Sheffield, 2001). The majority of these submissions have emphasised the current amenity value of the late Victorian garden cemeteries, whilst also stressing the need to conserve the fabric of monumental architecture. Few are likely to have been concerned with the issue of burial archaeology and smaller town-centre graveyards.

In parallel with the House of Commons inquiry, the Living Cemetery and Churchyard Project (2001) has also placed emphasis upon the historic and environmental landscape, focusing specifically on architecture and notable species of fauna and flora. English Heritage (2001a, 2001b) has contributed to this investigation, identifying the historic character of cemeteries. However, their focus concentrates upon Victorian garden cemeteries and the significance of listing individual monuments, cemeteries, parks and gardens. Nonconformist and Anglican burial grounds that do not fall into the category of garden cemetery are once again ignored.

The re-use of cemeteries is an issue raised by sociologist Dr Tony Walter within a memorandum to the Environmental Sub-Committee on cemeteries. Walter (2001) points out the growing need for burial space (cf English Heritage, 2001a) and draws a comparison with

Europe, where burial space is of a non-permanent nature, being rented and maintained by family members. The government's reply to the eighth report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee session 2000 - 2001 (Secretary of State, 2001) fails to mention the archaeological significance of disused burial grounds and cemeteries. The historic, environmental and social requirements of burial grounds are recognised, as well as the competing desires for burial and development space.

The opportunity exists for archaeologists to mediate in the conflict over the re-use of disused burial grounds and cemeteries. Where preservation is not possible archaeological excavation can release land for development or reburial in a manner acceptable to both local people and government agencies. However, the requirement for such work needs to be identified, and the importance of historic cemeteries on a local and regional level needs to be fully quantified. This may be best achieved through the establishment of a set of formal guidelines at national level. These guidelines could usefully identify how to characterise the significance and potential of burial grounds at the assessment stage and would be of use to both curatorial archaeologists and archaeological contractors.

### Conclusions

There is growing pressure to clear late post-medieval urban burial grounds and cemeteries for redevelopment or reuse. It is important for archaeologists to be seen to adopt a positive position in this process. Archaeologists involved in this field need to identify the significance of researching into later post-medieval burial practices, and to formulate research criteria across the archaeological discipline to establish realistic and achievable academic goals. An increasing number of burial sites are being excavated or observed by archaeological watching briefs, but the significance of these investigations is often limited. The identification of smaller burial grounds and cemeteries of scientific and historic importance can provide archaeologists with valuable research questions. The following five points suggest a way forward. Archaeologists should:

- i) *Establish a material culture sequence for the burial archaeology of the late post-medieval period, with particular attention to regional, social and religious variations.*
- ii) *Outline to the Government Environmental Sub-Committee of the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs the importance of archaeological investigation within smaller burial grounds and urban cemeteries.*
- iii) *Identify and acknowledge the potential importance that Nonconformist cemeteries have to contribute to our understanding of the late post-medieval period. Recognise that these sites are possibly more frequent than the historic record would suggest.*

- iv) *Conduct all work in this field with greater care and ethical consideration than is possible by commercial grave clearance companies, particularly with attention to reburial.*
- v) *Attempt to gain public support through the involvement of local communities by stressing the historic importance of burial sites and involving groups, such as friends of cemeteries, in research and presentation.*

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### Acknowledgements

Duncan Sayer wishes to acknowledge the help of Rebecca Rooney in the compilation of this article. Mr G Earle of the Home Office Coroners Section offered information pertaining to the Licence for the Removal of Human Remains and the responsibility for enforcing this licence. James Symonds acknowledges the assistance of Paul Belford in supervising a number of the archaeological projects discussed above on behalf of ARCUS. The analysis of human remains from these sites was aided by the expertise of Annsophie Witkin and Dr Andrew Chamberlain.

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