

Excavations at the Litten Medieval Cemetery, Newbury, Berkshire

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Archaeological excavation took place in Newbury in an area known as the 'Litten' in summer 2004 by Oxford Archaeology (Fig 1). Work revealed 59 graves from the hospital cemetery of St Bartholomew, which dates from the early 13th century to the middle of the 16th century. The osteological potential of this assemblage is considerable and initial analysis shows that it offers a unique insight into a particular social group of the medieval town. It also provides a valuable addition to the growing corpus of skeletal assemblages known from medieval hospital sites in Britain.

Introduction

St Bartholomew's hospital was founded some time before 1215 for the aged and sick when King John instructed the sheriff of Berkshire to

'give all facilities to the hospital of St Bartholomew at Newbury, and to the brethren serving God there, to have two day's annual fair at Newbury on the day and on the morrow of St Bartholomew.'

(Ditchfield and Page 1907, 95)

The hospital was granted the right of burial in 1267 and was categorised as a hospital for a warden, brethren and sisters living under religious vows (Knowles and Hadcock 1953, 292). As with similar institutions it had financial irregularities and struggled to survive after the Suppression of the monasteries. When the last prior left in 1554 the hospital was dissolved and the inhabitants of Newbury took over the management and received the rents. It was converted into almshouses, which were then demolished in 1698.

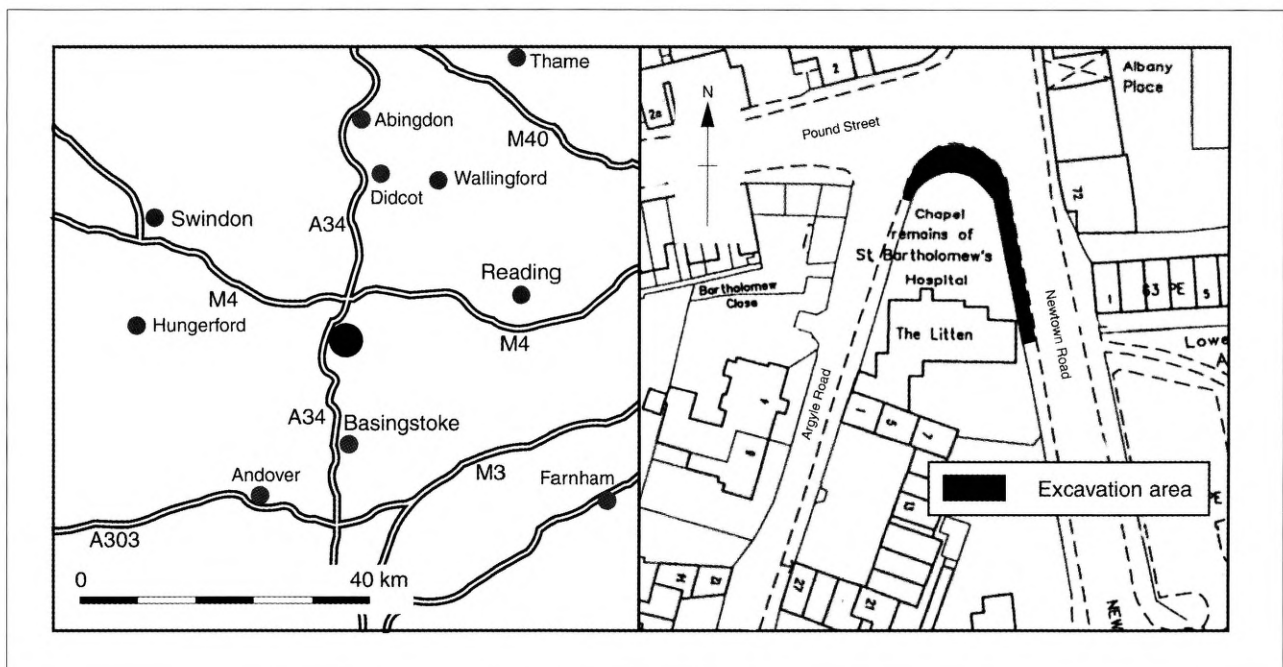


Fig 1 – Site location

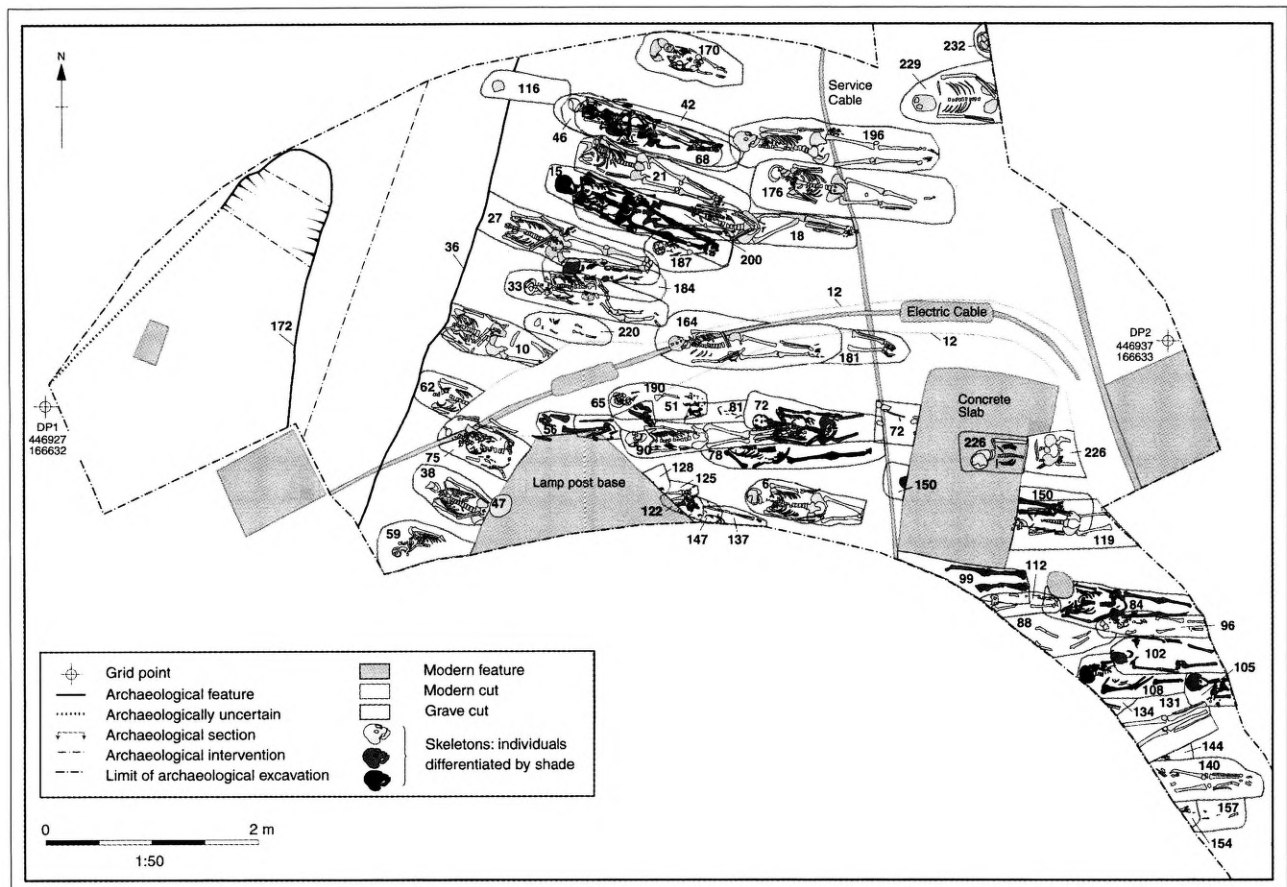


Fig 2 – Site plan

The cemetery

The excavation site was crescent-shaped and covered an area approximately 52 sq m, sited on the corner of Pound Street, Newtown Road and the southern end of St Bartholomew's Street. Previous excavations in Newbury had revealed medieval buildings lining St Bartholomew's Street (to the north of the site) and Cheap Street (approximately 300m to the north-east) but no work had taken place in the area known to have been the hospital of St Bartholomew. Burials had been discovered in the vicinity in the 1980s during an archaeological watching brief for an extension on the north side of Pound Street, which may have belonged to the Litten cemetery (Cannon 1998, 52).

The 2004 excavation revealed 59 graves and two linear features. The graves were the earliest features identified on site and were all oriented west-east. Three phases of burial were identified although, as with many medieval cemeteries spanning a wide date range, accurate artefactual dating was not

possible due to the absence of grave goods. The exception to this was an Edward I silver penny of the London mint found in a grave backfill. Some residual pottery was found in the graves, ranging from Roman to medieval in date. There were iron nails and staining from coffins in ten of the graves, some of which were occupied by sub-adults; interestingly the coffins came from the earlier phases of the site. Coffins are traditionally considered late medieval, high status items (Litten 1991, 86), but this does not appear to be the case here. A radiocarbon date recovered from one of the earliest graves in the sequence indicated that burial, at least in this part of the cemetery, probably began between the mid-12th century and the mid-13th century (see below). This implies that burials were probably occurring before an official licence was granted, a not uncommon practice for hospitals at the time (Knowles and Hadcock 1953, 292).

After the cemetery went out of use, two north-east to south-west oriented shallow ditches (36, 172), possibly later boundaries, cut across the north-west

corner of the site. A number of graves were cut by modern utility pipes and a lamp-post base. The vibrations from the heavy traffic on the road that had previously overlain the site resulted in the bones of the skeletons becoming fragmentary.

The skeletal material

The articulated skeletons of 37 adults comprised more male than female skeletons: 12 were female and 19 were male; 19 children were recovered, with a further three skeletons not subjected to full skeletal analysis and six which were not identified. A quantity of disarticulated human bone material was also recovered, representing a minimum number of 19 individuals. The skeletons were all laid supine, fully extended and with arms at varying positions, most commonly by the sides. Analysis of the skeletons was carried out to the standards recommended by Brickley and McKinley (2004). The preservation and completeness of the skeletons was generally good with 76.8% categorised as well-preserved. Of the inhumations 44.7% were more than 50% complete and 35.7% were less than 25% complete. The high degree of inter-cutting burials accounts for the varying levels of completeness. There was a high proportion of sub-adults, 33.9% of the total population (Fig 3). The majority of the adult individuals lived to less than 40 years (90% of total population) and none above 50 years. These results appear to show a high proportion of relatively young male individuals. However it must be borne in mind that the area excavated was a small portion of a much larger cemetery.

The adults exhibited lower than average stature for this time. Average male stature was 1.67m (5'6") and female 1.55m (5'1"). This is perhaps an indication of poor diet and health in childhood. However, the dental health of the assemblage appeared to be better than average, with low levels of caries, calculus and ante-mortem tooth loss. This contradiction is most likely due to the relative youthfulness of the cemetery population.

The pathologies exhibited were to be expected for a medieval hospital population (Fig 4). Amongst these were three cases of tuberculosis. This disease is connected with poverty and is commonly contracted from drinking infected milk or eating infected meat from a cow. A relatively high number (10) were suffering from sinusitis, often caused by living in smoky conditions, possibly an indication of poverty

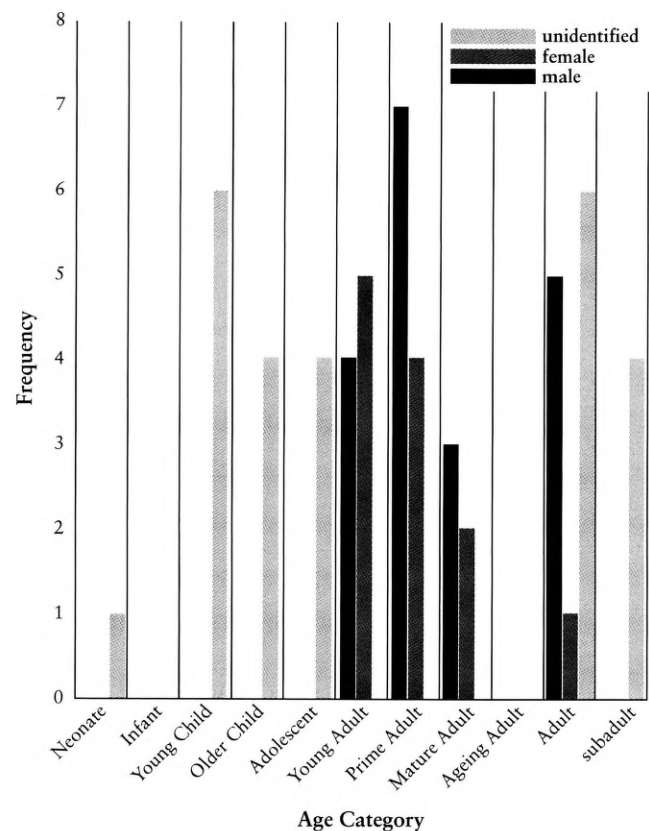


Fig 3 – Sex distribution amongst the age categories (n=56)

Pathology	Number of individuals
Degenerative joint disease (non-spinal)	9
Spinal degenerative joint disease	23
Sinusitis	10
Fractures	2
Rickets	1
Mild hyperthyroidism	1
Congenital Syphilis	1
Cribra orbitalia and porotic hyperostosis (Iron deficiency anaemia)	8
Periostitis	17
Tuberculosis	3
Congenital malformations	4

Fig 4 – Table of pathologies

and a cramped, crowded lifestyle. There was quite a low level of degenerative joint disease (nine individuals) and only 23 with spinal degenerative disease. This ailment is generally associated with old age, and so given the relative youth of the population it is not surprising to have a low rate of incidence of this condition. There was a single case of congenital syphilis from a 1 to 1.5 year old child. This individual exhibited the typical deformed teeth ‘mulberry molars’ (Hillson 1998, 171) and came from the earliest phase of use of the excavated part of the cemetery. This skeleton was radiocarbon dated to Cal AD 1150–1260 (95% probability, OXA15839), placing it firmly *before* the 1490s. A long-held belief was that Columbus brought syphilis back from the New World. There is now an increasing amount of evidence that this was not the case and skeleton 184 from the Litten cemetery in Newbury contributes significantly to this debate.

St Bartholomew’s Newbury was similar to other medieval hospitals, such as St Bartholomew’s Bristol and St Leonard’s Newark, in its higher proportion of males. It was different in that a large amount of children were recovered. This may reflect an admission policy at the hospital, or a zoning of burials. The health of the population reflected the class of people admitted to these institutions. The ailments were indicative of poor childhood health, cramped crowded conditions and much poverty.

Discussion

Though excavation did not reveal any of the hospital structures, it did show that the cemetery covered a larger area than previously thought. It also showed

that St Bartholomew’s was a hospital for the ‘sick and poor’ as described in the historical documents, admitting men, women and children from the poorer section of society. This excavation has added to the research into this important area of medieval hospitals and revealed a little about those people living in Newbury in the medieval period.

A full version of this report is available with the project archive at Newbury Museum, or from Oxford Archaeology.

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