

The Interview: Richard Buckley on Richard III and the investigations at the Greyfriars in Leicester

Interviewed by Jackie Hall

Richard Buckley is co-director of University of Leicester Archaeological Services (ULAS) and the lead archaeologist for the Richard III and Greyfriars project. The post-excavation research continues, and no doubt the media storm generated by the discovery and identification of England's last Plantagenet king will also continue. Here, we give Richard Buckley the opportunity to reflect on these events, and also to tell us some more about the medieval religious house – the Franciscan house founded c1224–1230 – in which the discovery was made. The interview was conducted in December 2013, before the conclusion of the judicial review, which ruled in favour of Richard III's reburial in Leicester.

Reflecting on the media storm that the Richard III excavation has generated over the past 18 months, what impact do you think this publicity has had on you, on ULAS (University of Leicester Archaeological Services), on Leicester and on archaeology?

It's been a bit strange really. To an extent we had already begun to get used to publicity even before the excavation. When the project was launched on 24th August 2012, we were taken by surprise by the sheer numbers of press who turned up, just because of the Richard III connection. We – the archaeologists – felt rather downbeat about the probability of finding his body, so it felt like we were being set up to fail in a big international way.

I was very excited though about finding out more about Leicester Greyfriars, one of the important medieval religious houses of the city, and after the discovery of the – then putative – body of Richard III, it was exciting to feed off the enthusiasm of other people. Since then, the archaeological team has given dozens of lectures all over the country, and everyone has been very excited about the work. For us, it has been a way

for members of the public to see what archaeologists do and to see some of the other things we find; not just Richard III, not just Greyfriars, but all the other archaeologies of Leicester.

Personally, I'm still finding the experience a bit odd. I'm occasionally recognized, which is quite nice but a bit embarrassing.

All the staff are really pleased about the discovery and the opportunities for outreach, but life goes on. It's helped increase our reputation, but we haven't especially had more work – we carry on doing the commercial archaeological work we've always done. As with other units, we're beginning to see a pickup in construction-based work.

[For archaeology in Leicester] there's been lots of excitement. The City Council [who own the site of the discovery] have been especially keen, and they managed to get a temporary display up and running in time for the February 2013 announcement, confirming the identity of the body as Richard III. If his body does stay in Leicester – currently the subject of a judicial review – then there's bound to be an economic impact for the city. One really good thing about the project

Fig 1
Richard Buckley on site at the Leicester Greyfriars
(Photo: ULAS)

is the interest in the archaeology of the city that it has encouraged, across all cultural groups. Archaeology can be seen as a bit of a white middle class pursuit, but everyone in Leicester has been enthused, and it's helped foster a sense of pride in the city.

Do you think there's such a thing as too much exposure?

Well, I'd quite like to get back to normal now. It's been fun, but archaeologists just don't go round digging up named individuals. From an archaeological perspective, has it all been good? Probably, for the interest it's stimulated in history and archaeology, and for widening participation. Ultimately, this much publicity for an archaeological project has got to be good for the discipline.

What do you think the impact of the judicial review is/ will be on archaeology?

Well, we don't know yet, but if it goes against the Ministry of Justice and ULAS – who both followed standard procedures – then the repercussions could be major. This project is a bit of a one-off in terms of what we found, but not in terms of the exhumation licence. The same problems might occur at, for

example, Reading with Henry I. Just to recap, the exhumation licence said that bodies would be retained for scientific study, with the exceptions of Richard III's, if it was found, which would be re-interred in Leicester Cathedral after study.

What do you think about the Richard III excavations possibly inspiring other excavations looking for famous historical figures? You've already mentioned Henry I at Reading and there's Alfred the Great at Winchester?

Funnily enough, immediately after the first investigation in September 2012, we did receive a few enquiries along those lines – to find Harold at Bosham, Sussex for instance, or Richard III's natural son at Eastwell, Kent. But these are strange things for archaeologists to be doing. On the whole, I'm more interested in the daily lives of ordinary people, but if a project like this is part of a particular research framework, then it can work.

What was the research framework for the Richard III/ Greyfriars investigations?

I've been researching the archaeology of Leicester for 30-plus years, and project-managed more than 90% of excavations in the city in the last 20 years. This project filled a major gap in our knowledge of medieval Leicester, especially relating to the friaries. Although the location of the Greyfriars has been known since the 19th century, until now we have known nothing about its layout.

Does Greyfriars fulfill our stereotypical idea of a mendicant house ie a rather constrained urban setting, perhaps with an unconventional layout within the precinct?

The other Leicester friaries – the Austin friars and the Blackfriars – arguably occupy more marginal land. This is particularly true of the Austin friary, which was excavated in the 1970s, as its precinct is bounded by two rivers. The Blackfriars occupied a big site within the walls of the Roman town, but this was probably also prone to flooding. By comparison, the Greyfriars was right in the commercial heart of Leicester, with the precincts bounded by two streets. There was certainly room for the church, two cloisters and claustral buildings, a gatehouse, kitchen, graveyard and small garden, but not for much more.

an earlier church – another case of the object and the building being potentially of different dates.

Would you like to extend your investigations and excavate?

Yes! Even more than finding out about the friary layout and architecture, I'd like to reveal the earlier land use – was the friary built on land already divided up into small urban plots or was it still relatively undeveloped large, late Anglo-Saxon plots? So far, all we have seen at that level looks like general garden soil, and we are still researching the benefactors of and gifts to the friary.

What chance is there of being able to excavate more?

At the moment, no chance. The site is not under threat, and the 2013 investigations were made to inform the strategy for the new visitor centre, so that that people can appreciate that it's not just about Richard III, a skeleton and osteology, but that it is part of the wider context of the Greyfriars and the city. We can show how complicated a medieval religious house was, and how much more there is to know about it. As with most archaeology, you do a new piece of work and a whole new raft of questions arise.

Fig 2

Plan of medieval Leicester (ULAS)

What have the recent investigations told us about Greyfriars that is new?

Because of later buildings and development, only 17% of the area of the precinct is available and we have only investigated a small proportion of that. Bear in mind, as well, that although we have exposed, evaluated, planned and sampled, we have not strictly 'excavated' even the medieval layers. Everything we have found out about the layout of the buildings is new, though. We now have a strong picture of two major ecclesiastical institutions – the parish church of St Martin [now the cathedral] and the Franciscan friary – facing each other on either side of an important medieval road, each with their graveyards next to the road. Apart from the church, we've also identified the chapter house, part of the east cloister walk and part of a major building lying south of the choir and presbytery that might possibly be part of an earlier – original – church. For the dates of the buildings we are heavily reliant on documentary evidence, as we have very few datable finds. Even the *in situ* floor tiles look as if they have been relaid, since their worn edge lies next to a wall. A tapered stone coffin with the body wrapped in lead was found in the presbytery in 2013. The bones within were also slightly jumbled, so it's possible that the burial, perhaps belonging to an early benefactor, was 'translated' from

Jackie Hall is Editor of Church Archaeology. She is a consultant archaeologist and Peterborough Cathedral Archaeologist and has also worked recently on Thetford Priory for the University of Leicester.